Is it WRONG to TRY to PiCK UP GIRLS iN A DUNGEON?

7

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA

Is it WRONG to try to PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON? 7

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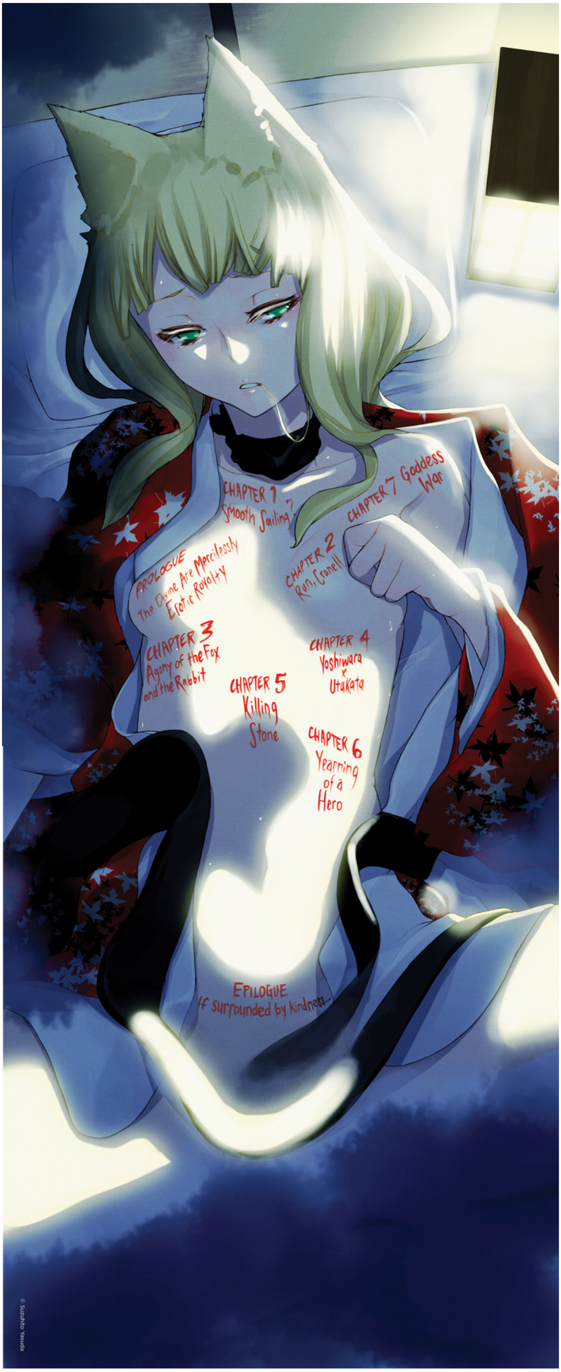
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Yearning of a Hero
CHAPTER 7 Goddess War
EPILOGUE
If surrounded by kindness...

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VOLUME 7

FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA

YEN ON
New York

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?,
Volume 7
FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Andrew Gaippe
Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA
MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA vol. 7
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Original Japanese edition published in 2015 by SB Creative Corp.
This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo, in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10104

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First Yen On Edition: December 2016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Ōmori, Fujino, author. | Yasuda, Suzuhito, illustrator.
Title: Is it wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon? / Fujino Omori ; illustrated by Suzuhito Yasuda.
Other titles: Danjon ni deai o motomeru nowa machigatte iru darōka. English.
Description: New York : Yen ON, 2015– | Series: Is it wrong to pick up girls in a dungeon? ; 7
Identifiers: LCCN 2015029144 | ISBN 9780316339155 (v. 1 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316340144 (v. 2 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316340151 (v. 3 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316340168 (v. 4 : pbk.) | ISBN 9780316314794 (v. 5 : pbk.) | 9780316394161 (v. 6 : pbk.) | 9780316394178 (v. 7 : pbk.)
Subjects: | CYAC: Fantasy. | BISAC: FICTION / Fantasy / General. | FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O54 Du 2015 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015029144

ISBNs: 978-0-316-39417-8 (paperback)
978-0-316-39422-2 (ebook)

E3-20161121-JV-PC

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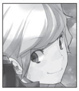
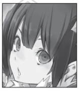
BELL CRANELL

The hero of the story, who came to Orario (dreaming of meeting a beautiful heroine in the Dungeon) on the advice of his grandfather. He belongs to *Hestia Familia* and is still getting used to his job as an adventurer.



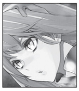


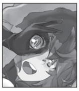
HESTIA

A being from the heavenly world of Tenkai, she is far beyond all mortals living on the lower world of Gekai. The head of Bell's *Hestia Familia*, she is absolutely head over heels in love with him!

AIZ WALLENSTEIN

Known as the Sword Princess Kenki, her combination of feminine beauty and incredible strength makes her Orario's best-known female adventurer. Bell idolizes her. Currently Level 6, she belongs to *Loki Familia*.



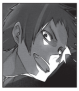


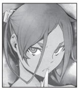
LILLILUKA ERDE

A girl belonging to a race of pygmy humanoids known as prums, she plays the role of supporter in Bell's battle party. A member of *Hestia Soma Familia*, she's much more powerful than she looks.

WELF CROZZO

A smith who fights alongside Bell as a member of his battle party. He forged Bell's light armor (Pyonkichi Rabbit Armor MK-II). Belongs to *Hestia Hephaistos Familia*.



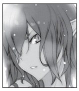


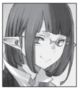
MIKOTO YAMATO

A girl from the Far East. She feels indebted to Bell after receiving his forgiveness. Former member of *Takemikazuchi Familia*, who now belongs to *Hestia Familia*.

LYU LEON

An elf and former adventurer of extraordinary skill, she currently works as a bartender and waitress at The Benevolent Mistress.





EINA TULLE

A Dungeon adviser and a receptionist for the organization in charge of regulating the Dungeon, the Guild. She has bought armor for Bell in the past, and she looks after him even now.

CHARACTER & STORY

The Labyrinth City Orario——A large city that sits over an expansive network of underground tunnels and caverns known as the Dungeon. Bell Cranell came to this city in hopes of meeting the girl of his dreams, and he joined *Hestia Familia* in the process. The trials and tribulations of the War Game behind them, Bells joins his supporter Lilly, his blacksmith Welf, and fellow fighter Mikoto on their first quest as a familia in the Dungeon. A new chapter in *Hestia Familia*'s history has officially begun. Will Bell finally get a chance to talk with his idol, the female knight Aiz Wallenstein?

LOKI

She leads Orario's most powerful *Familia* and has a mysterious western accent. Loki is particularly fond of Aiz.

RIVERIA LJOS ALF

High elf and vice commander of the most prominent *Familia* in Orario, *Loki Familia*.

FREYA

Goddess at the head of *Freya Familia*. Her stunning allure is strong enough to enchant the gods themselves. She is a true "Goddess of Beauty."

SYR FLOVER

A waitress at The Benevolent Mistress. She established a friendly relationship with Bell after an unexpected meeting.

NAHZA ERSUISU

The sole member of *Miach Familia*. She gets extremely jealous of other women who approach her god.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A very gifted creator of magical items. She belongs to *Hermes Familia*.

OUKA

The captain of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

HARUHIME

An animal person (Renart) who meets Bell in the Pleasure Quarter. Belongs to *Ishtar Familia*.

AISHA BELKA

An Amazon belonging to *Ishtar Familia*, she is rather bold and quite flirtatious.

HEPHAISTOS

Welf's previous goddess and the head of *Hephaistos Familia*. She has loose ties with Hestia dating back to their time in Tenkai.

BETE LOGA

A member of a race of animal people known as werewolves. He laughed at Bell's inexperience one night at The Benevolent Mistress. However, he recognized the boy's potential after witnessing Bell's battle with a Minotaur.

FINN DEIMNE

Known for his cool head, he is the commander of *Loki Familia*.

OTTAR

An extremely powerful member of *Freya Familia*.

MIACH

The head of *Miach Familia*, a group focused on the production and sale of items.

HERMES

The head of *Hermes Familia*. A charming god who excels at toeing the line on all sides of an argument, he is always in the know. Is he keeping tabs on Bell for someone…?

TAKEMIKAZUCHI

The head of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

CHIGUSA

Another member of *Takemikazuchi Familia*.

ISHTAR

Head of *Ishtar Familia*, which controls the "Night District" Pleasure Quarter with an iron fist.

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PROLOGUE THE DIVINE ARE MERCILESSLY EROTIC ROYALTY

PROLOGUE

THE DIVINE ARE MERCILESSLY EROTIC ROYALTY

Distant lights sparkled in the damp darkness of a rocky passageway.

The flickering dots created long shadows at the feet of monsters. Fire-breathing hellhounds growled as they sniffed the air. The white fur of a pack of horned almirage rippled as they looked around restlessly with their adorable faces, floppy bunny-like ears bouncing in time with their feet. The beasts were on the hunt, using their extraordinarily sharp senses of smell and hearing to locate the invaders crazy enough to enter their territory.

Monsters tracked their prey as they snaked their way through the countless tunnels of the intricate maze known as the Dungeon.

Somewhere deep within—*KASHH KASHH*.

The sounds of digging echoed through the hallways.

“Hey…is this really the right spot for mining?”

“Ahhh, do you doubt Lilly’s information? Lilly did the proper research, and she knows that upper-class adventurers bring home lots of those stones from this area.”

A young girl used a portable magic-stone lamp to illuminate an area for the young man to slam his mattock into the cavern wall.

Welf and Lilly worked in a dark corner of the Dungeon while quietly bickering back and forth.

“Sir Welf, Lady Lilly…still no success?”

“M-monsters could be here any moment…I don’t know how much more my nerves can take…”

Two new hushed voices joined the conversation coming from Mikoto and Bell.

All four adventurers were careful to keep their bodies low and out of sight. The boy with ruby-red eyes and white hair and the young girl with long black locks tied into a ponytail were sidled up close beside where Welf and Lilly engaged with the cavern wall. Bell and Mikoto were serving as lookouts. Needless to say, they were watching for monsters.

They were in a semicircular small room at the end of a long, narrow hallway. The four of them had come here to mine the Dungeon for a specific stone. If a group of monsters came barreling down the lone path or burst from the Dungeon walls around them, there would be no escape. With no end to their mission in sight, the two human lookouts shed another drop of nervous sweat every time the mattock hit the stone wall.

The wall that Lilly and Welf were facing bore the scars of their labor while hundreds of pieces of stone littered the floor around them. As of yet, they had still not hit pay dirt, and as Bell listened to the pair's unproductive bickering with an unreadable expression on his face, he happened to spy a spare mattock at Welf's feet. Abandoning his post, the boy went to pick up the tool and set to work.

The tool itself was made from the same material as many of the weapons and armor used by adventurers. Trying it out, Bell swung the metal tool against the cavern wall a few times.

Just as he began, rock crumbled away and a few twinkling objects fell to the floor.

"Ah."

""""AH!""""

A few flashes of light caught their attention as the ore rolled on the ground.

"W-we've done it! It's blood onyx!"

"You did it, Bell!"

"As expected, truly!!"

Relief and joy instantly spread throughout the party as they picked up three of the gemstones, stowed them in a small bag, and quickly left the dead end behind.

Transitioning from the subterranean cul-de-sac into a much wider regular path in the Dungeon, they finally got a chance to breathe.

"As requested, we have collected more than two blood onyx… And with this, our quest is complete, right?"

Lilly took one of the minerals out of the bag as they walked through the room. She examined the black onyx's surface, directing her gaze at the bands of bloodred and coal-black reflecting light from above. Welf and Mikoto, walking close beside their supporter to protect her, exchanged smiles as they were drawn in, too.

"Our other quest for the almirage furs was fulfilled after slaying that pack a while ago as well…"

"Yeah. Got 'em both done real quick…You know, Bell, ever since I joined up with you guys, drop items and stones like today seem to just fall into our laps. Do you just have really good luck?"

"Ah-ha-ha-haa…"

Bell had received two quests from Eina before Apollo's banquet was held. The deadline was fast approaching, so the party of four adventurers had journeyed to the thirteenth floor in the middle levels of the Dungeon.

Bell laughed drily at Welf's comment. About one month ago, when he obtained the Advanced Ability "Luck," Eina had taken a guess as to its effect—and now her words bubbled up in the back of Bell's mind.

Now that he thought about it, drop items seemed to be appearing at a higher rate than before he leveled up…The boy tilted his head and mumbled to himself.

"Is this really okay? There was no time left on the quests, but… There's so much work to do with moving into our new home, but we dropped all that and came down here…"

"It's always necessary to think about the future, Mr. Bell. That doesn't change just because the familia got bigger."

Following Lilly's merry comment, Welf turned and smiled.

"And I'm sure after the War Game and all, you wanted a chance to test out your current power, ain't that right?"

Welf keenly pointed this out almost like an older brother, leaving Bell speechless for a moment. The white-haired boy nodded sheepishly as he said, "A-a bit…" He was lost for words as he looked at the man resting a greatsword on his shoulder.

They had overcome the fierce battles of the War Game, deepened their bonds, acquired new strengths, and become family in the process.

Today was their first trip into the Dungeon as the reborn *Hestia Familia*.

"—Everyone, get ready."

Mikoto, her eyes locked on the path ahead of them, sounded the alarm.

Even before she finished speaking, Bell and the others drew their various weapons as quickly as Mikoto, everyone on their guard. All of them spotted the many sets of glinting eyes rushing in their direction from deep in the darkness.

Welf and Bell moved to the front as the first wave of beasts came into the light.

"I'm counting on you to take point!"

"On it!"

More than ten creatures leaped from the monsters' ranks, aiming to slash at the party in a swarm.

The hellhounds preparing to launch their ranged fireball attacks were the very first targets for the two flashing knives and greatsword. High-speed slashes dismembered the attacking monsters' bodies, while a slash with the ferocity of a sledgehammer struck a particularly large monster, smashing it to pieces.

"Lady Lilly, a spear!"

Mikoto moved into position behind Bell and Welf, who had already begun fighting, with her long black ponytail fluttering behind her.

Wasting no time, Lilly thrust a hand into her backpack and drew a short metal stake with a blade on one end. She threw the weapon with all her might, and when it flipped horizontally, in the blink of an eye, it extended into a two-meder-long pole before landing in Mikoto's grasp.

A collapsible silver lance. The former member of *Takemikazuchi Familia* wielded the weapon with ease from the center as she covered the flanks of the two forward attackers. Her swift, accurate strikes skewered the agile almirage one after another. It wasn't long before a trail of monster corpses and piles of ash were left in her wake.

Without missing a beat, she moved to intercept the natural weapons used by the monsters—stone tomahawks—and deflected them away from Bell and Welf.

"Well, it appears that Lilly's completely not needed anymore."

Standing by in the rear, Lilly looked over her comrades while admiring their handiwork. The entire encounter took less than a minute from start to finish.

Bell had become strong enough to pierce enemy ranks, carrying the party on the offense. He and Welf had learned how to anticipate each other's movements, their teamwork improving with each battle. Now that Mikoto had joined their group, they could count on additional support from the center of their formation. Since Bell could focus solely on attacking, their battle party was much more balanced than before and at least twice as powerful. With an upper-class adventurer and a High Smith strengthening their forward and center ranks, they had a distinct advantage over the monsters on this level.

"There's nothing to fear on level thirteen!" Lilly gleefully declared, happy instead of sad that she no longer had a role to play during battles. She hummed cheerfully while making her way to the line of monster corpses to perform her role as a supporter: to collect the spoils of battle.

That's when they heard something.

Ferocious war cries of monsters and a noisy, deep-voiced yell.

"Isn't that…a scream?"

"They are steadily approaching…I-it can't be."

Thud thud thud thud thud thud! Bell and Mikoto were petrified as the sounds echoed and approached from the darkness.

And a heartbeat later…

Just as they had feared, a group of adventurers emerged from a hallway, pursued by an even larger horde of monsters.

"They're coming right for Lilly and everyone…?!"

"Hang on a sec, hasn't this exact damn thing happened before?!"

The oncoming party of adventurers was madly running for their lives. That was, until they caught a glimpse of Bell's battle party. Their leader sneered as his bloodshot eyes twisted with glee.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry…!" Mikoto desperately apologized in response to Welf's outburst.

"You guys—*Hestia Familia*, aren't 'cha?! Be grateful, we'll share our haul with you!"

"Like hell you will!! As if we need 'em!"

"R-run!"

Passing off monsters from one party to another—a pass parade. Welf's enraged shouts and Bell's terrified screams overlapped as they approached.

Bell and his battle party turned their backs to the oncoming adventurers and the thirty-plus monsters not far behind them and took off at full speed.

"Who the hell was it who said we had nothing to fear on this floor?"

"It depends on the time and place!! Gah, Lilly couldn't even collect any magic stones…!"

"Lady Lilly, quickly! Hand me the backpack!"

"Wh-which way was the exit again?"

Welf readjusted the greatsword against his shoulder and let his frustrations show. Mikoto took the large backpack from Lilly and quickly slung it over her own shoulders. Bell swooped in and picked up the short prum girl, running as fast as he could with her in his arms.

The monsters picked up their pace, excited by the smell of even more fresh meat in front of them.

The reborn *Hestia Familia* used everything they had to escape from the Dungeon.

◆

Night.

Shrouded in darkness beneath the crescent moon, countless magic-stone lamps dotted the cityscape of Orario.

Standing proudly in the middle of Adventurers Street—Guild Headquarters, the majestic Pantheon. The clang of metal upon metal rang out from the industrial districts. The business quarter truly came alive, with rounds of thunderous applause bursting from the theaters and excited cheers echoing out of the casinos. Indeed this city, blessed with the resources harvested from the Dungeon, never slept, the hustle and bustle never ending.

In this thriving metropolis that seemed to symbolize prosperity itself, there was a certain place.

Flirtatious voices came from within the many small buildings that lined the street there.

Sometimes strong and sometimes barely above a whisper, these were the voices of men and women consumed by passion. Flickering candlelight illuminated the pairs of shadows intertwining on many of the windows and walls up and down the street, forms braided on beds.

Here desires turned into money, filled with bordellos as far as the eye could see.

The aptly named Night District felt completely different from the rest of the city. Dimly lit and seemingly standing apart from all the other streets and neighborhoods, it was always permeated with a mysterious, bewitching atmosphere.

"…That shithead."

Where people indulged their cravings and appetites, the brothels.

She sat above it all, watching from the highest floor of her own palace.

The shapely woman was heavily accessorized with a golden crown, earrings, an ornate necklace decorating her cleavage, and bracelets around her wrists and ankles.

The only piece of cloth on her body that could truly be called clothing was a thin skirt around her hips, held in place by a cord tied at her side. There was nothing keeping her voluptuous breasts from view; only one strap of cloth prevented her from exposing everything to the world. Her perfectly proportioned hourglass figure and silky smooth coppery skin, openly displayed, were enough to make any man lose his mind. Her beauty was strong enough to bring a country to its knees—her divinity simply took it one step further. Truly, gender mattered not when looking at her body, which could hold anyone prisoner as it exuded a sweet, alluring aroma.

Her room was dark, illuminated by only the crescent moon and stars above. With the room open to the night air on all sides, she had a perfect view of the tower standing in the middle of the city. She glared at it, as if trying to burn it down with sheer intensity and loathing.

She stood in the highest place in all the Night District.

However, she wasn't satisfied.

As for why, it was because of the chalk-white tower in the center of the city that pierced the skies, soaring overhead as though looking down on her, laughing at her.

The woman stared daggers at the highest floor of that tower.

That's where that vile woman would be even now, a Goddess of Beauty like her—the silver-haired goddess whom she hated most of all.

"Why are you there? Why is it you and not me who sits on the throne?"

Unacceptable. Absolutely unacceptable.

That woman was always looking down on her from the highest perch.

As if she were no different from the rabble when viewed from such heights.

Her beauty allowed that goddess to take anything she wanted within Orario—no, the world. And she was rubbing it in her face.

That deplorable vixen. Unbelievable.

Were all the children of Gekai, and the other gods, blind?

Ignoring her own unparalleled beauty and giving *that* their attention? Categorically inconceivable.

Cursing that goddess with every fiber of her being, the goddess Ishtar's beauty warped into something much more frightening.

"Don't get full of yourself, Freya…"

Fully drawn curtains let in the moonlight, illuminating Ishtar in profile.

The irritating truth was that that goddess was not only higher ranked in name but led a familia more powerful than her own. So powerful, in fact, that they could prevent others from catching up.

For it was Freya's beauty, along with her powerful followers, that allowed that woman to keep her place at the top.

"Keh!" Ishtar kept her eyes firmly on Babel Tower as a small laugh escaped her lips.

The smile on her face was one that could Charm anyone who laid eyes upon her—but it also hid a dark side.

It wouldn't be long now.

It wouldn't be long until she pulled that woman down from her perch.

Ishtar's lips curled into a conniving grin.

"Just you watch."

Spitting out those words under her breath, she stood up from the sofa she had been sitting on.

A bowl of exotic fruit sat on a table with a long, thin smoking pipe made in the Far Eastern style sitting at its base, all beside the sofa. The goddess grabbed her pipe before exiting the room. Several handsome young servants followed right behind her as she descended into the center of the palace.

Her braided black hair swayed from side to side and looked almost as though hues of purple were weaved into it. Smoke billowed from between her succulent lips after one pull from her oriental pipe as she descended to the top floor overlooking a grand inner chamber.

Spread out beneath her were her followers. Ishtar put her hands on the railing and addressed the prostitutes below.

“Now, ladies! It’s time to ensnare new clients! Tonight again, drown yourselves in love to your heart’s content!”

The crowd roared in approval. They were composed mostly of Amazons and contained a wide range from pretty, adorable girls to mature, sensual women. Ishtar looked down at their enthralling, lust-inspiring faces and couldn’t help but grin.

Her words were the signal for all the prostitutes to move out onto the streets. Some tried to get customers on looks alone, others called out to passing men, or still more directly approached the males who met their approval. The men had no idea that they were being hunted. Their thirst for pleasure emptied their wallets, spread information, relieved them of prized possessions, and surrendered their hearts to be devoured by the women in the brothels.

Like the ancient capital of old, built on decadence and immorality, this place was now alive with the celebration of hedonism and pleasures.

“Aisha, let’s get moving… Before all the hunky ones get taken!”

“Ahh, right behind you.”

An Amazonian woman responded to one of her kin. She walked the streets of the Night District, her long, toned legs bathed in moonlight until she stopped and looked back.

The atmosphere within Orario’s red-light district was foreign and exotic, unlike anywhere else in the city.

The brothels were designed to look like those from an island country far away. The red pillars and walls were brilliant and flashy, drawing in anyone who saw them. The Amazonian woman stood for a moment and admired one of the villas highlighted by the lights. Narrowing her eyes to hide her own pity, her long black hair fluttered behind her as she turned to rejoin her friend.

She strode past a window in front of one of the brothels where several prostitutes were lined up, waiting for customers.

Many young women had gathered in a chamber that was open to the street; only a lattice barrier separated them from the street as they called out to passersby, smiling and inviting them inside charmingly with friendly waves and finger curls.

“…”

Amid the prostitutes advertising their goods, there was one girl who sat quietly in the corner of the chamber.

Unlike the other women around her, she sat with her knees together and lips closed. Her cute, supple features and presence were enough to attract the attention of potential customers. Wearing a kimono—said to be the traditional garb of that island nation—underneath a traditional red bridal robe, her delicate body stood out like a beacon.

She had straight golden hair with green eyes, as well as a bushy tail of the same color as her hair.

With long, fox-like ears, the girl was absolutely stunning.

The only accessory she was adorned with was a black collar around her neck as she looked out from the chamber that served as her prison.

A cloud in the night sky shifted, allowing a moonbeam to cast its light upon her. She quietly whispered to herself.

“Seven more days…”

CHAPTER 1

SMOOTH SAILING?

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CHAPTER 1

SMOOTH SAILING?

The city was bustling.

"…One month?"

"Seriously…?"

Adventurers had gathered around the huge Guild Headquarters bulletin board. They stood in mute awe of one particular announcement.

"That punk-ass kid…!"

"Hey, Bete! Hurry up and let me see!"

One top-class adventurer snatched the paper from the bulletin board, crumpling it in his grip despite his ally's request.

"Hee-hee-hee, he's for real~."

And so many deities wore delighted smiles and caroused excitedly as the news spread of this particular rank-up announcement.

The War Game still fresh in the minds of the people, word of this spread across the city like wildfire.

"No, don't think so…"

My goddess, who's walking in front, turns around to look at me as I sniffle and blink over and over.

Same as me, my goddess, Lady Hestia, also has her arms full with baggage. "Someone must be talking about you, eh?" she says with a smile. I grimace and wave it off. That's just a silly superstition.

"More importantly, Bell, this! Take a look!"

Tap, tap, tap, tap. She takes off at a quick pace. I follow after her into the shadow of a building and around the corner.

Suddenly I can see our new home, fully renovated and gleaming like in a dream.

"Wow…"

"So? What do you think? We live here starting today!"

I walk through the front gate and set the boxes down in the garden to take everything in. I feel my eyes stretching wide, studying every detail of the manor glistening in morning light.

We did some remodeling to *Apollo Familia*'s home—after we kind of took it over—and made it our own. Their god had some really strange tastes when it came to design, but it was well built and now it looks good as new. Three stories tall, the stone structure has a surprising amount of depth. Heck, it could pass as a minor palace.

Hestia Familia's emblem, a bell and flames, hangs above the front door.

My cheeks tingle with excitement as I take a look at my goddess. She grins back at me, puffing out her chest with pride.

"I've come a long way since Hephaistos dumped me into that grungy basement!"

As she looks at our dearly-wished-for, splendid new home, my goddess puts her arm to her face as she sheds a rare, manly (womanly?) tear.

I force a smile. Thinking back, that room under the church was cozy. Living there, just the two of us, it wasn't all that bad.

Of course there were a ton of inconveniences, but I'm sad that it was destroyed…I still have so many good memories of being with my goddess and the kind moments shared in that place.

But, yeah…

My friends, my family have grown.

And now we have a home big enough for everyone. So maybe this is a good thing.

I scratch the back of my head as I feel a ticklish smile spread across my face.

"Hestia, job's finished as requested."

"Ohh. Thanks, Goibniu."

I'm still admiring the manor when the architects responsible for the renovation—members of the *Goibniu Familia*—emerge from every direction in succession, readying themselves for departure. Their leader, Lord Goibniu, greeted Lady Hestia and she responded in kind.

We had hired them to do the remodeling. Lord Goibniu is a deity of smithing and architecture. His familia is quite unique in Orario, taking construction jobs upon request. Of course, the blacksmiths and craftsmen in *Goibniu Familia* are well known and have quite a following. Though not as popular as *Hephaistos Familia*, I know that there are several upper-class adventurers who prefer their work above all. In fact, it looks like one of their smiths had made Lilly's wrist bow gun, which is specifically designed for prums.

It's been four days since they started working and two days since our quests that took us to the thirteenth floor of the Dungeon.

They worked fast and did a spectacular job restoring the stone on the outside of the manor. *If the outside is this good, what's the inside like?*

Looks like the two deities are finished working out the finer details of payment and discussing the work done to the building. Lord Goibniu has a rather stout body, not much different from a dwarf's. He shakes Lady Hestia's hand with his own meaty appendage before making his way out the front gate.

Seeing their leader take his leave, the rest of his familia file out behind him, carrying their equipment with them.

"Just what I expected from Goibniu. They followed our instructions to the letter."

"Ah, they did?"

"Mm-hmm. Just like everyone wanted, they made changes to quite a few rooms and installed some new facilities inside and outside the manor."

I murmur in admiration and stand beside my goddess, looking up once more at our new home.

Once I get all these boxes taken care of, I'll have to go check everything out.

* * *

“Ohhh…!”

Hands and knees on the floor, Mikoto peeked at a full, steaming bathtub.

She had been walking through the third floor of their remodeled home. She had dropped everything to investigate the room she had requested.

The architects had used the existing showers and transformed the space into a large bathhouse. As if they had read her mind, there was a large cypress tub made in the style of her homeland that could comfortably fit ten people at once. *Shhooo.* She could hear the quiet sound of hot running water pouring steadily from the nozzle above the tub. The faint fragrance of cypress wood wafted up to Mikoto as she peered into the tub, her face reflected on the surface of the water.

Still on all fours, Mikoto suddenly tore away her gaze and raised her head. Everything from the walls to the ceiling, floor, pillars, and buckets was made of wood; the glint of the showerheads added to the charm of the room.

Everything reminded her of home in the Far East. She was so moved at the sight of it all that she shuddered lightly.

At the same time she watched the thin wisps of steam climbing above the water, a sound rose from—her thin throat.

“Uh-unnn…!”

Mikoto was conflicted.

They were currently in the process of moving in; even now her companions were carrying boxes upon boxes into the manor and working very hard. *I don’t have time to be slacking right now*, she thought just as her eyes fell on the pile of luggage on the floor behind her.

But…the white steam and alluring smells were just so *enticing*, drawing her in like magic.

She had been suppressing those urges, but now…

“J-just a short one.” She quietly said her shallow excuse as she went back out to the dressing room. Sticking her head into the main hallway, she looked both ways as she nervously checked to make sure no one was there before closing the door completely.

Shwip. Undoing the sashes on her clothes, the sounds of fabric sliding off filled the changing room.

Splish. She lightly stuck her toe into the water, pushing ripples across the surface.

Her thin calves were quick to follow, and then her thighs, before—*sploosh*—her whole body slid into the steaming bath.

"Ahhhhhh…!"

A pleasurable sigh escaped her lips as she submerged herself up to the shoulder.

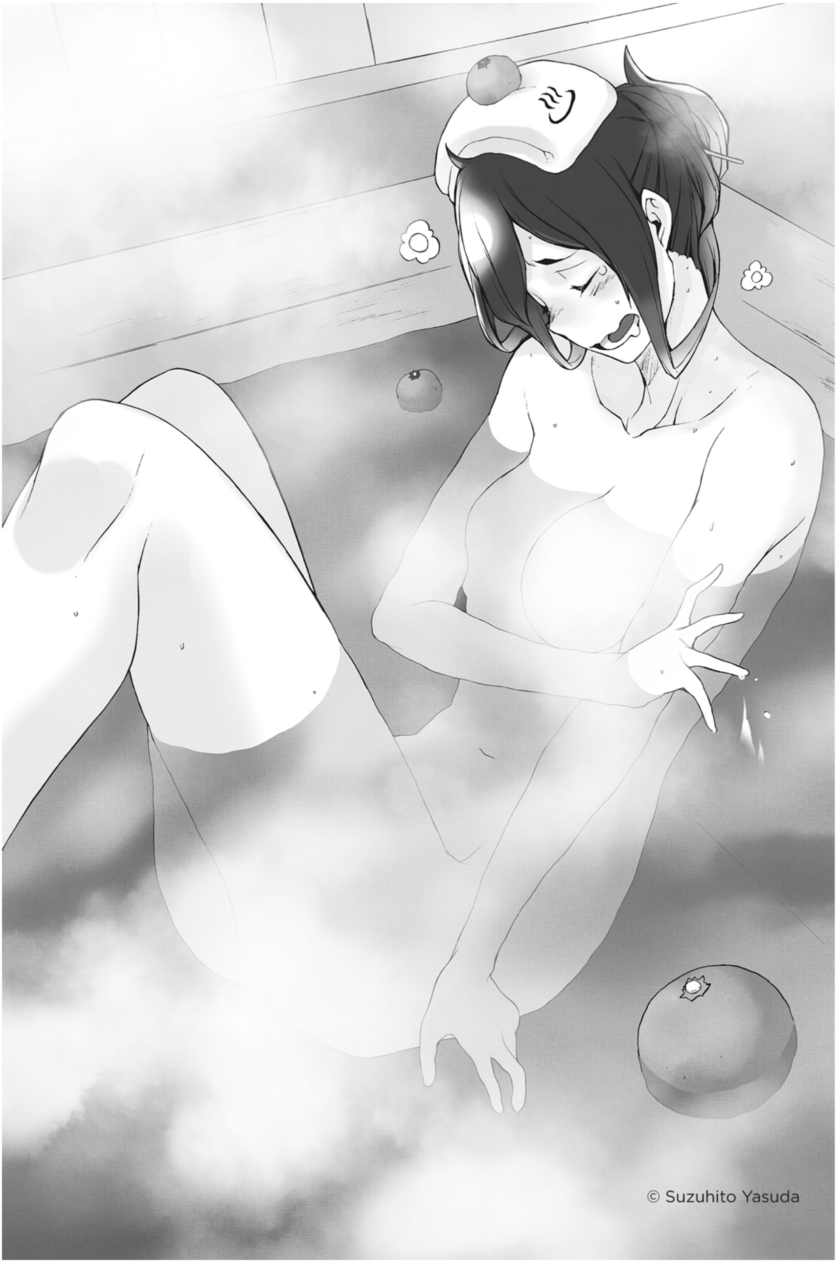
She enjoyed the bath's warm embrace. Squeezing both eyes shut, Mikoto let her whole body relax.

"Please forgive me, Lord Takemikazuchi, everyone…!"

As she fervently apologized, she let her face loosen as well. She had been forced to live in relative poverty after coming to Orario with Takemikazuchi and her childhood friends. A proper bath was out of the question and they had to make do with only showers. It went without saying that none of them ever complained or tried to live beyond their means…But now, the repressed desires she had kept bottled up burst free all at once.

Memories of her old favorite outdoor hot spring rushed to the surface of her mind.

She happily reminisced old scenes and landscapes of her hometown until soon, her skin was dyed the same color as cherry blossoms.



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For Mikoto, there was no greater pleasure in this world than a hot bath.

Incidentally, it was still early in the morning.

“Well, that’s *Goibniu Familia* for you—fast and efficient.”

A small stone shed had been constructed in the yard behind the manor.

Welf stood in the open doorway, completely unaware of the excited grin growing on his face.

His new workshop was built outside and apart from the rest of the grounds

"Ignoring the storage areas, there are more than twenty extra rooms, not including the ones hidden or underground…"

Lilly was walking around inside the manor, a map clutched in both hands.

She followed it to a room and took a quick look inside before jotting down a few notes about the interior and anything that stood out before moving on.

The more rooms she checked, the more troubled she looked.

"Uhnn, this place is too biiig…"

The manor, constructed of solid stone and wood, was three stories tall. In addition, it had yards in the front and back as well as a surrounding iron fence. When it was still owned by *Apollo Familia*, over one hundred adventurers had called this place home. Even if they included their goddess in the count, *Hestia Familia* had only five members. This residence did not match their circumstances at all.

"With only everyone and Lilly, it will be impossible to clean and maintain this place…Perhaps hiring a maid would be a good idea?"

She knew that needlessly spending money should be avoided, but this problem needed to be solved.

They could hire someone unconnected to any familia, or a noncombatant member—someone who belonged to a familia but had not received a god's Blessing. Several commercially focused familias around Orario employed noncombatant members to assist in their retail endeavors.

Even her own goddess, who worked a part-time job for *Hephaistos Familia*, was a prime example of this arrangement. Of course, people hired in this manner worked someplace far away from their employer's secrets, for security.

Professional butlers often received a high salary, equal to what Guild employees made or what hardworking lower-class adventurers could make in the Dungeon. That being the case, it would be cheaper to hire a young woman who was unable to pursue an occupation in Orario's famous magic-stone industry and already searching for a job opening…Lilly's train of thought made it this far before she stopped in her tracks.

"…Mr. Bell's eyes would wander, so that's not an option."

The young boy turned red at the mere sight of the opposite sex, so Lilly had misgivings about adding another young female member to the household. But if she couldn't trust even an older maid, it would end up being a demonstration of impending financial doom.

Visions of the gray-haired bar girl Syr smiling at him flashed in front of her eyes. She vigorously shook her head back and forth to make them go away.

"But, mhnn, on the other hand…"

She took a look out the window of the first-floor hallway at all the flowers and plants in the inner garden that would need a lot of attention. Lilly's mind was weighing her young maiden's heart against the current situation.

Each member of *Hestia Familia* prepared for their new lifestyle and surroundings in their own way.

◆

"It's like a dream come true…"

As I keep moving in furniture and baggage without pausing, I look up in wonder at our new home.

The remolded walls of the building reflect the sunlight and seem to sparkle, to glow. Even if I ignore the possibility of it being the product of overexcitement about moving into a new place, it's probably still a bit of an exaggeration.

"…It would be really nice if our familia got bigger, too, not just our home."

As I talk to myself, I catch glimpses of Lilly and the others walking about here and there.

A smile grows on my face as I adjust my grip on the box in my arms.

"Hey…cut it out…!"

"I don't wannaaa…!!"

"Hmm?"

The voices reach my ears as I'm walking along the outer wall of the building, heading for the backyard.

Two girls are arguing in the street that runs by our new home.

Well, maybe not arguing…One girl has her arms wrapped around two bars of the iron fence surrounding our property, while the other girl is trying to yank her away by the collar. The girl in front is throwing a tantrum like a child, crying all over, while her counterpart can't hide her irritation.

"Wait, I remember you…Miss Cassandra? Miss Daphne?"

They're exactly how I remember them. One has long flowing hair while the other has a short cut, and their personalities couldn't be more different. I fought against them in the War Game—both are former members of *Apollo Familia*.

I can't exactly walk away and pretend I never saw them at this point…

"Ah…Little Rookie."

After I set down the box and start to jog over to them, Miss Daphne notices me first.

She doesn't loosen her grip on Miss Cassandra's shirt collar. It isn't long before the other girl's characteristically droopy eyes also point in my direction.

"Um…well…"

I try to ask them what's going on, but the words…I can't get them out.

This used to be their home and I feel guilty about taking it from them.

Miss Daphne must've figured out what's going through my mind. She looks right at me and shrugs.

"You guys won fair and square so you don't have to let it weigh on your conscience. Besides, we're the ones who started the war, so there's that, too."

Miss Daphne's doing her best to convey that there are no hard feelings.

While I'm glad to hear her say that…I still feel bad. "Seriously, it's all right," Miss Daphne adds while she forces a smile, attempting to reassure me.

"The two of us were pressured to join anyway, so actually it's good things turned out like this. Now we get a chance to join a familia led by someone a little less crazy than our former god."

The fabric of Cassandra's clothing is straining again as Daphne makes another attempt to pull her away from the iron bars. Fixing her grip, the short-haired girl explains what they've been up to.

They appear to be at some sort of crossroads, trying to figure out their next step. Being upper-class adventurers, they had been scouted by many gods and goddesses. Unfortunately, all their recruiters had major downsides that they just couldn't ignore, so they rejected all offers.

High-ranking familias aren't showing any interest in them and the pair has no interest in selling their services like mercenaries. So for now, they are trying to find a decent god who leads an average familia.

So, Daphne explains to me, she isn't holding any grudges, though thinking that all the other former members of *Apollo Familia* would do the same is a mistake. She adds that, as the victor, I should hold my head high a bit…I guess if she's willing to say that much, I'll stop worrying about it.

The two of us share a smile on opposite sides of the black iron bars.

"So then, um, what brings you here…?"

Finally getting to the point, Daphne sighs and pulls on Cassandra one more time.

I look down at the girl, her entire body pressed up against the iron bars.

"You see, this one lost her favorite pillow."

"Pillow?"

"Yeah. I keep telling her she can just buy a new one, but…"

"Th-that's the only one that wooorks. I-I can't get any sleep without it…"

This is the first time Cassandra has said anything this whole conversation.

Eyes leaking, talking through sobs, she looks over her shoulder at Miss Daphne tugging on her collar.

So then, that means…

"Miss Cassandra, did you forget the pillow inside?"

We removed everything that *Apollo Familia* left behind when we moved in. Was there a pillow like that when we were cleaning up?

Cassandra thrusts her beet-red face through the space between the iron bars after I ask my question. She speaks timidly, choosing her words carefully.

"I don't remember, honestly…I saw it was here in a dream, so I…"

"A what?"

D-dream…?

"Like I said: Stop saying such stupid things already!"

"I'm begging you, please believe meeeee!"

Daphne scolded Cassandra for saying that a dream led her back here.

By this point, I've figured out most of it. Miss Daphne tried to stop Miss Cassandra from showing up at another familia's home unannounced, asking around for a request under such embarrassing pretenses.

At the same time, she wasn't taking Miss Cassandra's dream seriously. So both were at a loss as to what to do.

I don't exactly believe in fortune-telling or clairvoyant dreams, but…

As one could expect, Cassandra's tearful, pleading eyes are heartbreaking.

"Umm, in that case, I'll go take a look."

""Eh?""

I add, "For the pillow," to clarify when the two girls fall silent and stare at me.

Daphne looks utterly shocked, while Cassandra seems to have a puzzled look behind her collected tears.

"You…you're serious…? It was a dream, you know—a dream. You're going to trust a delusion?"

"D-delusion…? But you're pretty sure it's here, right?"

I look away from Miss Daphne's flustered expression to make eye contact with Miss Cassandra. She doesn't say a word, only nods her head up and down as fast as she can. In that case, I can't say no.

I ask her where to look and she hurriedly recounts her dream to give me directions.

"D-do you believe me…?"

Up until the very last moment, she still speaks timidly.

I force a smile.

"Everything is fine. I trust you. I will do my best to find it."

The second the words leave my mouth, Miss Cassandra looks overcome with emotion, staring right at me with tears in her eyes and all choked up.

"I'll be going now," I say while backing up, cold sweat running down my face from her moved expression. She's making this a bigger deal than it really is. Miss Daphne calls out to me, saying I don't have to do this, but I turn back and wave to tell her it's all right.

Miss Daphne really doesn't have to be so obstinate…

If it showed up in Miss Cassandra's dreams, then she probably just remembers the location of the pillow?

…I don't really want to take hocus-pocus stuff like that seriously, but she just seemed so sure of it that I thought I should retrace the steps of her dream.

Something feels strange…It feels like there's a hot spot on my back.

It had been only a moment—the Status etched into my back had suddenly heated up.

I reach around with my finger, confirming the place that flared up.

"…Luck?"

The heat is coming from an area really close to my Skill slots.

Thinking about the shapes of all the hieroglyphs engraved onto my back, I tilt my head and wonder what's going on.

Stepping inside the front door of our home, I start searching for the pillow.

"Is this it?"

"—That's it!"

It didn't take long.

After finding it, I rushed back with the pillow in my hands and as soon as she saw, Miss Cassandra gave a happy cheer.

I hand the light-pink item through the fence and the next thing I know, Miss Cassandra is holding it close with all her might. Her eyes close as she hugs her long-lost friend, happy as happy could be. I can't help but feel glad, seeing her elated reaction. The pillow had been right where she told me, somehow squeezed between a support pillar and a wall.

While Miss Cassandra is still radiating the joy of the puppy being reunited with its owner, next to her, Miss Daphne murmurs, "She was right…" in disbelief.

"Um, thank you so much! Thank you for believing me! Thank you, thank you…!!"

"N-no big deal, really…"

She keeps bowing over and over, saying thank you over and over again. Another smile appears on my face out of pure embarrassment. Even my body is shrinking away from her.

It takes me a little while to walk around the fence so that I can talk to them without bars in the way. Miss Cassandra starts bowing yet again until finally poking half her face out from behind the pillow.

She sucks in her cheeks as her eyes study me.

There's a strange warmth in her gaze, and it's making me blush.

Keeping her eyes on me, Miss Cassandra takes a few small steps to Daphne's side.

She whispers something into Miss Daphne's ear with the pillow still in her arms.

"What…Really? Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh…"

Surprise is written all over Miss Daphne's face as Miss Cassandra's cheeks turn bright pink, and she nods again.

Why do I get the feeling of being left out of this conversation? Miss Daphne straightens and turns to face me a few moments later.

"Little Rookie, we have something to attend to…Later."

She thanks me for finding Miss Cassandra's pillow before turning her back on me. Miss Cassandra herself shows me another smile before bowing one last time and following after her partner.

The two of them go around a corner and are out of sight before I know what happened.

"*Later…*?"

What did she mean by that?

Anyway, I have to get back to work. The box from before is still sitting behind the building. I jog back around the fence and pick it up.

Our conversation replaying in my mind, I bring the box into our home.

"Ah! Bell! Take a break as soon as you're done with that!"

"Eh? Is that okay?"

My goddess called out to me from a room on the second floor as I passed by the door.

I protest, telling her that we haven't made much progress at all. She just smiles at me with all the confidence in the world and waves me over.

"Hee-hee, the party can't start without you! Take a look at this!"

I walk all the way across the room to my goddess standing in front of the window. She holds up a piece of paper.

She hadn't told me what to expect, so I cautiously take the paper from her and give it a once-over…

"…*Hestia Familia,* now recruiting new members! Come, my children!"

An invitation to join our familia written in the common language of Koine is sprawled on the paper. Our emblem, a flame and a bell, is at the top of the invitation, which contains the information about how to apply.

And the day to meet the goddess in person is…today.

My eyes jump off the paper and I look back at her. She's smiling from ear to ear.

"There's another one just like this at the Guild's bulletin board, and I asked the ladies at my part-time job to post one at the stand! It's almost time to meet everyone…They should be outside right now!"

She casts her gaze out the window.

I rush over and take a look for myself.

"W-wow…!"

Just outside the iron fence in front of our front door…

Many races of humans and demi-humans are standing there.

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"Hey, we're gonna be looking at the new prospective recruits. Meetin' on the front lawn."

Mikoto was carrying some small boxes down a hallway when Welf called out to her.

She spun on her heel to face him. That was when the young man realized something out of place and smiled wryly.

"Did you…take a dip this early in the day?"

"Ah, no, this is just…you see…!"

One layer of loose clothing, slightly pink skin, and damp jet-black hair gave it away. She realized that, with just one look at her, anyone could tell she had just gotten out of the bath. Her face promptly turned a much darker shade of pink.

While it had been only a quick one, she felt guilty for skipping out on the work that had been assigned to her. Her normally tied-back hair was hanging loosely, and now she looked like a kid with a guilty conscience as she tried to hide behind the boxes in her arms.

Looking at Mikoto, Welf's earlier smile deepened.

"…I won't say anything to the others, so come along when you can."

"I-I'll be there right after putting this away!"

Thanking the older smith for his understanding, Mikoto could feel her cheeks burning as she practically screamed her response. She dashed away, leaving Welf behind her.

"I lack discipline…"

She muttered to herself as even her ears burned red.

Thump, thump, the boxes shook in her arms as she raced through a hallway as fast as she could with short little strides.

"Oops."

A little white note fell out of the top box and landed on the floor at her feet.

"Now I've done it," said Mikoto as she set down the mountain of boxes before leaning down to pick it up.

She was about to slip it back inside when the quality of the paper caught her attention. She held it up to the light coming through the window to see what was written on it.

"What is this…?"

◆

"Th-this isn't a dream…?"

I clear my throat as I take it all in.

Humans and demi-humans of all shapes and sizes flood into our front garden the moment we open the gate.

My face feels numb. I survey the crowd from my vantage point on the front porch.

"It's all real, Bell! All these children came here today to join our familia!"

The goddess takes a few steps in front of me, spreading her arms to welcome the newcomers.

Thanks to her recruiting posters, all these people—more than fifty in all—came to our home today because they want to join *Hestia Familia*.

"We are the talk of the town after winning the War Game, especially among the newcomer adventurers who just arrived in Orario. Lilly and everyone's familia has the most momentum right now."

Lilly's standing on my goddess's other side, explaining the flood of hopeful recruits.

The images they saw of the War Game through the Divine Mirrors spread all across Orario are still fresh in their minds. Seeing a young, vastly outnumbered familia overcome the odds and emerge victorious must've left a strong impression.

Travelers and merchants probably spread the word of our exploits outside the city as well, which can only help.

Only when I notice Lilly's stare do I realize that I'm smiling. I can't describe this feeling of happiness, this uplifting joy.

"Th-this means we're not the baby familia anymore…! Goddess, we did it, didn't we?"

"Yeah! It all started three months ago…Such a short time, and yet it feels so long!!"

My goddess and I clap our hands together, basking in the joy of finally being recognized as a legitimate familia.

Lilly looks kind of uncomfortable, forcing a smile with her eyes on us. But I'm sure that she's just as happy as we are, if not happier.

All those nights of eating Jyaga Maru Kun—crispy potato puffs—alone with the goddess in the hidden room under the old church feel like ancient history now. There are so many memories, things that would never happen again—except the potato puffs. That's still on the menu.

I'm just so happy.

The goddess had tried to recruit people on her own, but she'd been rejected so many times. Now people are literally lining up to join our familia.

Still holding hands with my goddess, I look out across the crowd and start tearing up.

There are so many races. Humans, of course, but also elves, dwarves, beastpeople, prums, and even a few people of mixed race, all standing in our front yard. Several of the men look Dungeon ready, dressed in full armor and carrying their weapons of choice. There's a group of girls off by the gates dressed in traveler's clothes. They must've just gotten to the city a few days ago. Everyone's chatting excitedly among themselves while stealing glances at the three of us on the porch. The atmosphere is electric.

The sun bright in a blue sky overhead, everything so bright and colorful…it's hard to believe this is happening. Dreams do come true!

"Ah…Miss Daphne! Miss Cassandra!"

I recognize two familiar faces in the crowd. I talked to them not half an hour ago. Miss Daphne's short hair swishes around her head as her usual smug eyes meet mine. I feel Miss Cassandra's soft stare a moment later.

They weave their way through the crowd and come up to the front porch. Daphne forces a smirk.

"This girl told me she wants to join your familia…"

Miss Daphne plops her hand right on top of Miss Cassandra's head. My eyes shoot open in surprise.

Miss Cassandra shyly smiles at me for a moment before hiding her face. I feel the muscles in my cheeks melt as another big smile forms on my lips.

So this is what she meant by "later"…They knew!

I have no clue why they chose our familia over others, but I'm so happy I couldn't care less! "Thank you so much!" The words practically explode out of my mouth.

To think, third-tier, upper-class adventurers are going to join us! I could jump for joy right here, right now!

"Quite the crowd."

"Ah, Welf!"

Welf comes out onto the front porch just as Miss Daphne and Miss Cassandra disappear back into the mass of people.

"Are you that thrilled that the familia is growing?"

"Yes! Everyone living together, it'll be like a big family…!"

"Having more people doesn't mean only good things, you know. Bigger family means bigger obligations, too."

He has even more points, talking about how as a group there are more details to figure out, as well as more potential for drama and competition.

He's speaking from experience, having once belonged to the much larger *Hephaistos Familia*. There's that big-brother aura of his, and that all-knowing grin. The balloon of elation in my chest is a bit smaller now.

He's right…There are many sides to a larger familia.

"Welf, relax, would you? I'll be talking to each of them one-on-one, figuring out what makes them tick!"

"What…? Y-you're not letting everyone in?"

The goddess heard everything that Welf said and came to join the conversation.

Honestly, I'm shocked. I thought everyone here was going to be a member of our new family.

"Gods have their own individual tastes and hobbies. That's what makes each familia different. Think about it, Bell. What would happen if a child who didn't agree with our way of thinking joins us? There'd be a lot of problems."

“Well…”

“And don’t forget, I’m a goddess. One quick glance is all I need to determine a child’s personality. And they can’t lie to me, now, can they? I’ll turn away anyone I think would damage our familia.”

I get what she’s saying. It’s the right thing to do.

Our familia’s dignity would suffer if a new recruit turned out to be a drunken bar brawler or a violent criminal. I’m not so sure I could work alongside someone like that, either. Of course, I know that Lady Hestia won’t make decisions based on personal history but on content of character.

It all comes down to whether the deity thinks you can benefit the familia. Nothing else matters. After being rejected from familia after familia when I first came to Orario, I understand this all too well.

But standing here in front of all these people who want to join…I don’t want to turn away a single one of them.

“…And I can’t allow anyone else like that supporter inside these walls. Adding another person who looks at Bell with lustful eyes would send this house into chaos…”

“Lilly can hear you, Lady Hestia.”

The goddess and Lilly keep talking in hushed voices, but I still feel really bad that we can’t accept everyone. I’m not as happy as I was just a minute ago, but I definitely feel much more down-to-earth. Taking a deep breath, I scratch the back of my head.

“Be that as it may, the way Lilly sees it…There are a few demi-humans here today, but since Mr. Bell is the leader of the familia, we are more attractive to humans.”

She’s right.

The goddess chose me to lead, but there’s another reason, too. I’m the only one currently in *Hestia Familia* who didn’t join by Conversion from another group.

Honestly, I’m a little worried that I’ve been given so much responsibility but…it’s kind of embarrassing being called a leader like this.

Apparently, there are some familias where it’s easier to join if you happen to be the same race as the current commander of the group. Personally, I think of the group leader as more of a figurehead. On the other hand, seeing all the humans here who are inspired to join my familia because of me feels pretty good.

In addition to what Lilly’s pointing out, many of the newcomers decided to dress the part of an adventurer. Swords and spears, shields, light and heavy armor—the mix of fighting styles and weapons is almost overwhelming. Some have the air of a soldier's discipline while others exude the confidence of a knight. I can already see myself prowling the Dungeon with them, counting on their support. There are even a few supporters equipped with large backpacks in the crowd as well.

I can't tell if they're members of other familias who want to change affiliation or if they're "free" adventurers from outside the city. The one thing I do know, however, is they definitely look the part.

"Well then, shall we start the interviews?"

The goddess calls out to the crowd while I'm scanning the candidates.

I look over at Lilly and Welf. They nod back and we all step off the porch and into the crowd.

The goddess looks around at all the gathered adventurers and is just about to announce the beginning of the interviews when—

"L-LADY HESTIA!"

A shrill scream emerges from inside.

The four of us turn around to face the building as Mikoto bursts out the front door.

"What's wrong, Mikoto?"

"I-i-it fell…fell from a box…!"

The goddess can't hide her confusion. Mikoto's entire body is trembling, color gone from her face.

She holds up a piece of paper in front of us, the goddess, and the recruits, and yells at the top of her lungs:

"A two-hundred-million-valis loan contract

Every single set of eyes is locked onto the numbers in the middle of the form.

Two hundred million

floor. The room is still littered with mounds of open and unopened boxes. A space in the center had been cleared for a table and a small sofa. Antique candles light up the dim room, but they use magic stones rather than flame to produce light. We're sitting around them, our faces illuminated in the darkness.

I'm the only one lying down, letting out the occasional pitiful moan. My head still hurts. Lilly, Welf, and Mikoto are sitting in a ring around the candles while my goddess sits in the middle.

Surrounded by Lilly and the others, Lady Hestia is wearing a terribly troubled face.

The ticking from the clock on the wall echoes, indicating that the sun is setting right now.

Half a day has passed since the disaster on the front lawn, and by now there is almost no light coming in from the windows. Night is upon us.

"We were delayed by cleanup and taking care of Mr. Bell, but please tell Lilly the truth. The truth about that contract."

"Oh, that involves only me. So it doesn't affect the familia at all…"

"Thanks to that 'harmless' loan that shouldn't affect the familia at all, we have zero new members. Lilly thinks that it had quite an effect. As our goddess, it's your responsibility to keep us informed about these matters."

I've never heard Lilly's voice so sharp before. She's taking the role of our representative. The rest of us are staying quiet.

Mikoto was the one who forgot herself and announced everything in front of the candidates. I can tell she feels bad about it, but even she is waiting for an explanation. Welf is sitting cross-legged, eyebrows low and eyes locked firmly onto Lady Hestia.

The goddess looks to all of us in turn, cornered in every sense of the word. At long last, she starts mumbling her story.

"The truth is…a lot of things happened when I asked Hephaistos to make Bell's knife…"

And so begins the whole story behind the Divine Knife—my knife.

First, she practically forced her friend Hephaistos to forge it.

It's the only one like it in the world, and the goddess of the Forge is probably the only one capable of making it. Therefore, it's extremely valuable.

That was why Hestia had to pay such an absurd amount of money. In the end, she had agreed to the terms of Hephaistos's loan.

Welf, a former member of *Hephaistos Familia*, presses the inner corners of his eyes as he listens to the goddess. "Always wondered who forged it, hieroglyphs and all…So it was her." The words quietly slip out of his mouth. Mikoto's eyes are wide, the truth about the loan sinking in. On the other hand, Lilly looks like she found the missing piece to a puzzle. She's known me since I was a bottom-of-the-barrel adventurer, one who carried a weapon far too valuable for my Status. "So that's why…" I hear her whisper under her breath.

The goddess is just sitting there, nervously twiddling her thumbs and waiting for our reactions.

"…Lilly heard many things when she went out earlier to buy medicine for Mr. Bell. Many rumors are being spread around the city by other gods and goddesses…They say that *Hestia Familia* is about to crumble under the weight of debt. Word is traveling fast."

"If that is true, then…"

"Yes, the possibility of any new recruits is zero."

Lilly raises her face and informs us what's going on in the city. Mikoto cautiously followed her train of thought, so Lilly clarified. I feel like I'm gonna cry.

This is exactly how it was before, when my goddess was rejected at every turn…

"Our real problem is…the two-hundred-million-valis debt. That's crazy."

"Exceedingly crazy, indeed."

There's a great deal of tension in Welf's and Mikoto's voices. Both of them look to Lilly.

She's become our accountant of sorts and has a better understanding of our finances than anyone else.

"Almost all our winnings from the War Game have been spent. There's almost nothing left in our savings."

"…"

"Also, due to our victory and Mr. Bell's ranking up once again, the Guild has elevated our familia rank to 'E,' which means we must pay more taxes. Lilly's expecting somewhere in the range of one million valis per year. Please prepare yourselves."

"……"

"In other words…to repay the debt, we must spend more time prowling the Dungeon than ever before."

A chill runs through the air as a hush falls over us.

We're doomed to a life of poverty if we don't start working twice, three times as hard as before. The reality still isn't sinking in.

The goddess jumps to her feet, unable to stay still any longer. She looks at all our glum faces and practically explodes.

"D-don't get the wrong idea! This is *my* loan; I'll pay it back by myself! No, I *have* to pay it back by myself!"

Grabbing the contract off the table, she smacks her chest with her free hand and yells loudly enough to make all of us jump. Lady Hestia insists that this debt has nothing to do with us.

"Actually, this contract is a beautiful jewel that shows just how much I love Bell! It's not going anywhere!"

"As if a debtor's contract can be a crystal of love."

I'm not sure why Lady Hestia is bragging about all those zeroes, but Lilly looks far from amused.

Even Welf and Mikoto are looking at the goddess with ice-cold stares. The goddess starts mumbling even more things, trying to ignore the sharp gazes. "It's because of her scheme that it's this expensive…Hephaistos is a good friend, so she's always trying to use some excuse to make me work hard…"

Twin black ponytails shaking as she wipes her face, the goddess takes a deep breath and says with a lot more force:

"The point is, none of you need to worry about this loan. Everyone here knows I'm working at a part-time job, right? Everything I make there is going toward paying off the knife. It'll take a couple hundred years, but I'm paying it back in full."

"…"

"I'm sorry for hiding this…but I promise, it won't cause any trouble."

She adds it might be too late for any new recruits, but…Her eyes look really apologetic. "Please don't worry about it," she says as a final plea.

The rest of us exchange confused glances, trying to figure out how it's possible for us to ignore something like this.

"…But."

I take the damp cloth off my forehead and sit up.

I look at the goddess from my spot on the furry rug.

"You…took out a loan to get this knife, all for me?"

"…"

She doesn't answer, but I know what her silence means.

A twinge of guilt runs through my chest.

The Divine Knife has saved me more times than I can count. It's thanks to the goddess that I've been able to survive so many battles, all because she gave me this knife.

She willingly took on that kind of debt so I could become who I am today.

"…Please don't make that face, Bell. It was my decision…"

Seeing her gentle smile, hearing her kind words, I can't stay on the floor.

Climbing to my feet, I take the Divine Knife off my belt and make eye contact with my goddess.

"Goddess…I want to help. Let's pay it back together."

Her pure blue eyes tremble.

I can tell she's surprised, but I mean every single word.

This knife…It's the symbol of our family, our bond.

"Please, let me do this."

"…"

The goddess freezes as I express my earnest desire—and she grins.

Her right hand reaches up to the base of one of her ponytails.

"As your goddess, it would put me in an awkward position if I accept your help to fix my own mistakes…"

Her delicate fingers lightly touch the first present I ever gave her.

Blue hair bands. They're decorated with a blue ribbon tied to look like a flower and small silver bells. They ring softly as she taps one of them.

The sound fades and the goddess smiles once again.

"I don't care how long it takes, I'll pay off the loan. What I want the four of you to do is…support me."

Now it's our turn for our eyes to tremble. Everyone, including me, is looking at Lady Hestia with similar faces.

Support her. Basically, put warm food on the table, manage the familia, and make our home a happy place. She wants us to protect the things that make us smile, together.

That's what she's saying.

"I'm a goddess with debt…Is that okay?"

"O-of course!"

Her smile is radiant, even in the dim light. I bow and nod out of reflex.

She's a little stubborn and refuses to accept our financial help, but she depends on us, believes in us. If all five of us work together and support one another, we'll find a way.

Looking at that smile of hers, I swear to myself:

"…If those are the words of our goddess, we can't exactly go against them."

"Hee-hee, this is true."

"Please don't do anything like this again."

The others get to their feet with smiles of acceptance on their faces. Lilly makes sure to get in a warning before the mood overtakes her as well. "I won't! I won't!" responds our goddess as she expresses her gratitude to each of us in turn.

Then we begin talking about what to do next while standing in a circle above the magic-stone candles.

"This is the state of our familia. First and foremost, we need to make enough money to live comfortably and save enough to pay the Guild's tax when the time comes. We must avoid taking out another loan at all costs."

"This means that from now on, our activities shall be spearheaded by even more trips to the Dungeon?"

"To raise our efficiency and performance on future hunts, we all need to get stronger, ASAP."

"It might be hard…but we can keep putting in effort toward recruiting new members…right?"

After Lilly got the ball rolling, Mikoto, Welf, and I each add our own opinions.

Lastly, Welf says it's my responsibility as the leader to bring this familia meeting to a close. It's a little embarrassing, but I stick my hand into the center of our circle. Everyone else, including our goddess, puts their right hands on top of mine. "Let's do this!" I say with as much confidence as I can muster.

Everyone responds together with a short, hearty cheer as we all look toward our familia's future.

"All right! Now that that's settled, let's stuff our faces tonight to prepare for tomorrow!"

"How can Lady Hestia say that when we need to save as much money as we can?! Your financial skills are horrible!"

"Hey, now, don't be so stingy! One night's not going to make much difference!"

"Absolutely not! Lilly can no longer trust Lady Hestia! Lilly will handle *all* money matters from now on!"

The goddess and Lilly go back and forth a little more, but we still end up pulling out all the stops for dinner tonight.

All of us make full use of our big kitchen to prepare many dishes, using different types of meat and fish at the goddess's request.

When we're done, there's chicken-fried steak, several fried fishes, a kind of rice ball that is popular in the East called "onigiri," Jyaga Maru Kun, and a bit of wine on the table.

Mikoto laughs as she continuously offers chicken to Lilly, who keeps making strange noises as she wolfs it down. Meanwhile, Welf sips on his wine and watches as the goddess inhales one Jyaga Maru Kun after another. Trapped between all this chaos, I don't eat all that much. Instead, I watch the show unfold. It's late evening outside. The sounds of laughter and warm light leak outside through our kitchen windows.

I remember eating meals like this with Gramps. As memories flood back, I fight to hold in tears. I don't tell anyone about it, though.

"Familia."

Joined by our goddess's blood, I'm sure we're a family.

This is what my heart has yearned for, ever since I lost the man who raised me.

This is why I came to Orario, and I'm so happy I did.

I'm so happy I met these wonderful people. Today only reinforced that.

All of us share food and laughs well into the night.

◆

The sun comes up on the morning after our familia "party."

The goddess left early to go to her job, leaving the four of us to finish up here.

"Every box gets emptied today."

I say this to myself as I walk down a hallway with two of them in my arms.

None of us will have energy to unpack after a day working in the Dungeon. As long as we do it together and finish this today, we can start to focus on saving money.

“Miss Mikoto, you have a visitor. Miss Chigusa is outside.”

“Lady Chigusa?”

Mikoto and Welf were making progress on the first floor when Lilly called to them from the front.

Mikoto immediately drops everything and goes outside to meet the visitor.

Chigusa is a member of *Takemikazuchi Familia*, as was Mikoto until recently. In fact, they are both from the same town in the Far East and probably old friends.

I take a look out the window, and there she is. Her bangs are always long enough to hide her eyes. But she seems more anxious than usual. Arms folded across her chest, she’s pacing back and forth on the front lawn…I wonder why.

Chigusa rushes to meet Mikoto the moment she emerges onto the front porch.

I can’t hear what they’re saying, but Mikoto looks just as surprised by Chigusa’s body language as I am. Suddenly—

“—A-are you certain?!”

A yelp of surprise.

“…Something up?”

“Lilly has no idea.”

Welf and Lilly come up behind me and look out the window as well. All of us lean closer to the window, trying to hear anything being said outside.

Chigusa is outside for only a few more minutes before turning around and rushing across the front lawn. Mikoto is coming back inside.

“Mikoto, is something wrong?”

“E-eh, no, nothing at all…”

I venture a question, but she avoids eye contact and quickly changes the subject.

“There’s still so much to do.” She rushes past me and picks up the closest box before disappearing around the corner.

The remaining three of us exchange glances, wondering what’s wrong with our friend.

CHAPTER 2 RUN, CRANELL

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CHAPTER 2

RUN, CRANELL

"I-I think I shall retire early tonight."

Dinner plates had been washed and put away.

Only four of them were sitting, relaxing in the living room, when Mikoto made her declaration.

Hestia was absent this evening. Last night's meeting had lit a new fire within her. This burning desire to pay back the loan gave her the motivation she needed to work overtime.

Bell and the others ignored the shakiness of Mikoto's voice and either waved or said, "Good night," as she stood up. The clock had yet to strike eight when the girl left the living room and closed the door behind her.

Going up the stairs and walking through the moonlit hallway, Mikoto was on her way to her room on the third floor.

All of a sudden, she changed course.

Racing back in the other direction without making a sound, she opened a second-floor window and jumped down to the grounds behind the manor.

She hid behind trees and checked to make sure the living room lights were still on before letting herself out through the back gate.

"That's our cue. We're tailing her."

"It's been a long time since Lilly's done something like this."

"I-is this okay…?"

Meanwhile…

Welf, Lilly, and Bell watched Mikoto step through the back gate from a different vantage point.

They had been expecting Mikoto to do something like this. After the girl went upstairs, they left the living room lights on and hid in the garden outside where they could see both exits. Three figures crept quickly and quietly through the darkness.

The stubborn girl was obviously trying to hide something. Following her was the only way to figure out what.

“Miss Mikoto seemed overly concerned with the cleanliness of the windows today…just as we expected.”

“Anyone coulda figured it out, way she kept stealing glances at the window.”

Welf and Lilly noticed that Mikoto hadn’t been herself during the day. The biggest clue was that she spent way too much time looking outside. So the two of them came up with this plan and dragged Bell into it despite the boy’s confusion. They were ready to pursue her whenever Mikoto made a move.

Their concern for their friend couldn’t let them ignore her secrecy and odd behavior.

“She’s a lot like you.”

“Huh?”

“Mr. Welf is saying that lying isn’t her strong suit, Mr. Bell.”

The black-haired girl, who was always honest to a fault, made her way into the vibrant city.

She was too focused on her destination to notice she was being followed. Her three pursuers kept to the shadows, staying just far enough behind her to conceal their presence. They followed Mikoto away from their home in the southeast to the southern part of the city.

It wasn’t long before they arrived in a district just off South Main Street—the Shopping District.

It was certainly living up to its name. The night was still young, but every corner of the street was already bright, colorful, and crowded. Lines of people were already filing into theaters, casinos, and high-class bars. Wealthy-looking merchants and adventurers rubbed shoulders with gods as they walked down the street lined with massive buildings, looking for that night’s entertainment.

Mikoto traveled into the heart of the Shopping District before suddenly darting into one of the backstreets, and she ran up to meet another figure standing in front of a shady-looking store.

“Is that Miss Chigusa? Are they alone?”

“Yeah, and they’re on the move…Now, where are they headin’?”

The two girls from the East shared an anxious nod before leaving the store behind.

Bell and the other two watched their movements from around the corner of a stone wall. Ignoring the suspicious glances of a few demi-humans, the three continued to trail their targets.

The spirit and sounds of the Shopping District faded into the distance as the two girls pressed forward through dark alleyways.

"…No way. This direction…It can't be."

Welf's eyes shot open—he knew where they would end up if they kept going this way.

Their targets veered to the southeast. Welf struggled to get the words out of his mouth.

A jolt traveled through Lilly's brain as she connected the dots as well.

"Huh?" Bell looked at his friends in confusion.

"Bell, you oughta head home."

"Mr. Bell, please turn back."

"Eh? Ehhh? Why? Why now?"

His allies' sudden requests only worsened his confusion.

Bell looked back and forth between Welf and Lilly over and over. The two of them repeated themselves, choosing stronger words.

"Seriously, listen to me. You're not old enough yet."

"Old enough? Mr. Bell should never go there, ever!"

"But we've come all this way…Ah, they turned a corner!"

Bell was certain he could be useful and could take care of himself despite Lilly's and Welf's desperate attempts to persuade him otherwise.

Their brief argument nearly made them lose their targets.

"Dammit, Li'l E, give it up, it's no use. After them!"

"Gaaah! Miss Mikoto, why there of all places…?!"

Abandoning their attempts to convince Bell to turn back, the three of them dashed from their hiding place. Lilly seemed to be the most frustrated, a sour expression contorting her face. Bell was lost for words, but he kept up the pursuit.

They passed several drunken adventurers sprawled out on the street before finally reaching their destination.

"What—what is this place…?"

And then.

Bell's eyes opened wide to take in everything that appeared as the backstreet opened up before him.

They had arrived at the eastern edge of the fourth district of Orario, adjacent to Southeast Main Street.

Despite being relatively close to the Shopping District, there was a much more *impure* atmosphere about this place.

Every magic-stone lamp attached to buildings and pillars projected pink light. While there weren't too many of them, each light dimly illuminated a billboard decorated with seductive red lips and other alluring feminine features. Women of all shapes and sizes wearing skimpy dresses or clothing that completely revealed their back and hips were walking up and down the street.

More than half of these women were Amazons, but several humans, animal people, and even prums dotted the street as well. They called out invitingly to men in every direction, flashing smiles as if issuing a challenge. Then they'd spend a few minutes talking with said men before taking their hand, or even their waist, and guiding them into one of the many buildings.

The street was absolutely flooded with luscious breasts, thin shoulders, and seductive thighs in every direction. The air was tinged with perfume, or maybe it was simply the ladies' naturally sweet scents as they worked up a sweat.

"Wh-wh-who are those people…?"

Bell's fingers shook as he pointed down the street, pitifully stuttering as he spoke.

An inevitable awakening was taking place within him.

The fact that these erotic women were prostitutes shook him to his very core.

He'd found the Night District.

Bell's face turned bright red as the stark differences between the Pleasure Quarter and everything else he knew began to sink in.

"This is why Lilly didn't want Mr. Bell to come here!"

"I just can't get used to this smell…"

Bell finally figured out what *here* meant as he watched men disappear one by one into different establishments. Lilly snapped at him as she got redder and redder. Welf stood behind them, trying to shield his nose with his arm.

So this is what they were trying to warn me about…?! Bell's realization came a little too late.

Another memory bubbled up from the back of his mind. *"I forbid you to go southeast."* Even Hestia had warned him…The serious look in her eyes had made his blood run cold. Now he knew why.

“Orario…has a place like this?”

“In this district, every building here and along Main Street closes its doors and brings in its signs during the day. Of course, Mr. Bell wouldn’t know…”

The Pleasure Quarter slept during the day and only showed its true colors at night.

It went without saying that no average citizens lived here. The district had a lonely, desolate feel to it. Bell had never even ventured into the Shopping District before tonight, so it wasn’t surprising at all that he didn’t know about the nature of this district’s businesses.

The main reason, though, was that the people who knew him best had kept it a secret from him.

Welf gave Bell a quick slap on the back to get him out of his trance as the three of them continued the chase.

“Cultural designs of the Kaios Desert, architecture from the Dizara Region…Never ceases to amaze me.”

“Don’t forget, Orario is the center of the world. People from all walks of life gather here, including them.”

Buildings designed to look like things the citizens of Orario had never seen before loomed behind all the scantily clad prostitutes. Some roofs were built to resemble the stark triangles of the Far East, other structures looked like they belonged to desert nomads, and still others were built out of solid stone like the castles in the north. It was a strategy to encourage as many customers as possible to come back and see a different style each time. Lilly explained everything at once, clearly not happy about being here.

Different types of brothels from all around the world were on display.

It was like nothing Bell had ever seen before. He felt lost in a world that kept changing, and yet new things kept popping up wherever he looked.

People he didn’t know, streets he’d never seen, and an atmosphere he’d never dreamed of.

It was all very overwhelming for the farm boy from a small town in the mountains.

“W-Welf, have you, um, been here before…?”

“Back when I was with *Hephaistos Familia,* a few guys dragged me out here after a night of drinkin’. But I’ve never used the…

facilities.”

Bell tried to start a conversation to get his mind out of the whirlwind. Welf cringed as he responded. “Just didn’t sit right with me,” he added. A small group of the women of the night approached the three adventurers, their enticing smiles brought to bear. One of the ladies reached for Welf’s hand, but he brushed it aside.

Lilly jumped between another girl and Bell, fending her off like a bodyguard. “Lilly was lucky enough to have never set foot here until today.” She shot an angry glare at the prostitute coming in for another pass.

“Ughhh…What are Miss Mikoto and Miss Chigusa doing here…?”

Bell’s head was still spinning as his eyes searched for a safe place to look. Seeing Mikoto in the distance, he posed another question.

“Young women willingly coming to this place…Lilly’s afraid to say it, but to sell their bodies for money?”

“?!”

“Nah, those two don’t have it in ’em.”

Bell gasped at Lilly’s suggestion. Welf calmly pointed forward and said, “Have a look.”

Both girls were frantically waving off advances, arms a blur at chest height.

Their faces were red enough to give Bell a run for his money. Mikoto and Chigusa stayed side by side, their eyes frantically scanning the area. Their shoulders jumped every time they heard a catcall from some passing perverted man or taunts from the ladies working the street.

It was at that moment that a large man decided to make a move and reached out to touch Mikoto. “P-please, stop!” The startled girl squeezed her eyes shut as her body moved on its own. The man landed face-first on the stone pavement a heartbeat later.

Chigusa seemed like she was about to cry. The two looked like lost baby deer in the middle of the city. Lilly squinted and Bell broke out in a cold sweat, but both agreed that they were not here for that reason.

“Lilly sees Mr. Welf’s point—pure girls like Miss Mikoto and Miss Chigusa could never do such a thing…In that case, why are they in the Pleasure Quarter?”

The three fell silent to contemplate Lilly's question. At the same time, the two girls started moving again. Bell, Lilly, and Welf followed them all the way to the main street.

Orario's third and fourth districts sat on either side of Southeast Main Street. Mikoto and Chigusa crossed from the fourth district they had been in up until now and quickly vanished into the entrance of the third district opposite them.

"This is bad, we're gonna lose 'em! Let's move it!"

"S-sure!"

Welf moved to the front of their group because his height gave him the best chance of keeping their targets in sight.

Here, the prostitutes worked in teams to wall off areas and guide customers toward their establishments. Welf forced his way through, clearing a path despite the constant barrage of invitations and insults. At last, they set foot in the third district.

The lights in the third district were much brighter than the streets earlier. Welf spotted Mikoto right away.

She was surrounded by a group of gods wearing obscene smiles.

"Well, if it isn't Eternal † Shadow. Imagine meeting you here!"

"Black hair, can't get enough!" "Eastern girls are so sexy!"

"I-if you'll please excuse us, w-we have an important matter to attend to…!"

The group of male deities had the two girls cornered against a wall. Each offered to show them a good time while barring their escape.

Mikoto stood in front of Chigusa, shielding her from their advances. However, these were gods, not mortals. She was forced to rely on words to fend off the deusdea.

The gods themselves, however, were enjoying her reactions more than seriously trying to initiate a transaction. Each comment and suggestion more vulgar than the last, the deities took great pleasure in seeing what shapes Mikoto's face would make.

Welf and Lilly sighed as soon as they realized what was going on.

"My Lords, you've had your fun."

Welf approached them.

"Eh?" The group responded in unison as they turned to face him. Mikoto and Chigusa turned pale as ghosts.

Lilly emerged from behind the young man and opened her mouth to speak.

“Why waste time out here? Does the night not grow short?”

“Oh no, she’s right! ‘Special Playtime’ at Jessica’s place is almost over!”

“Had to sneak away from my own familia. Better make tonight count!”

“I brought my familia’s money along!” “Oh, me, too.” “So did I.” “Me as well.”

““““HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!!”””” They all shared a big laugh before continuing on their way.

It was common knowledge that some deities got most of their entertainment from places like the Pleasure Quarter. The anger of their followers was not enough to prevent them from emptying their bank accounts of hard-earned valis.

The storm had passed. The adventurers looked at one another in awkward silence.

“Wh-why are you here…?”

Free from the barricade of the gods, it was Mikoto who finally broke the silence.

Lilly sighed again and stepped forward.

“Miss Mikoto was being strange. It may have been rude, but we followed you.”

“We’re a full-fledged familia now. No hiding anythin’ from one another, got it?”

Eyes still hidden behind her bangs, Chigusa stepped out from behind Mikoto.

“I’m so sorry,” said the thin girl in a weak voice. Her shoulders shrank as she offered an apology.

Welf scratched his red hair and said, “How about an explanation?”

“…You see, we learned that…someone, from our hometown in the East, was seen here, and…”

Chigusa struggled to speak and looked back at Mikoto for support.

Since the girl wasn’t the best at communication even under normal circumstances, Mikoto nodded and took over for her.

“Lady Chigusa acquired this information from a trusted acquaintance yesterday…This person, she went missing from our hometown many years ago…”

Finding her bearings, Mikoto looked at her allies apologetically and answered their questions in full detail.

Lilly listened intently, whispering, “That’s why,” after Mikoto explained where they got the information.

“Miss Chigusa and Miss Mikoto came this far to verify the report, yes?”

“That’s correct. This was our matter, and we have no proof. It would have been improper to involve anyone else at this stage…A-and it’s this place…”

Revealing the contents of the conversation that took place on the lawn this morning, Mikoto repeated that she didn’t want to get Bell or the others involved.

“What about that big guy? He’s from the same place—why didn’t you ask him?”

Just as his name suggested, Ouka was also from the East and the commander of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. A childhood friend of Mikoto’s and Chigusa’s, they still maintained a close relationship to this day.

Chigusa blushed and hid her face the moment that Welf brought him up.

“I-I didn’t want to bring him here…I don’t want him to come here…”

“If I may, Lady Chigusa doesn’t see Captain Ouka as just a friend…More of…as a man.”

Mikoto‘s face turned bright pink as she divulged one of her friend’s secrets to help the others understand. Both girls avoided making eye contact. Chigusa’s throbbing red ears stood out against her black hair.

That was enough to convince Welf. Rather than get her own familia involved, she went to a valued friend currently in a different group to help her confirm the information first.

Lilly also nodded in agreement. After catching a glimpse of Chigusa’s pure maiden heart, how could she not?

“But how can someone else’s description be so precise? They might have made a mistake…”

“This person is a member of a rare race…There were too many defining characteristics to ignore.”

Mikoto answered Lilly’s question.

Memories flooding into her mind, Mikoto shook her black ponytail as she looked at the ground.

“Unlike us, she’s a member of the aristocracy. We cannot take some outsider’s word that she was spotted in the Pleasure Quarter…

We had to see her with our own eyes…”

They had to fight to overcome their fear of this place. However, they could not sit idly by, knowing that this person might be here.

At the same time, Welf’s shoulders jumped the moment he heard the word *aristocracy*.

Aristocrats—nobility.

Lilly shot the member of the Crozzo family a sideways glance. Sensing the tension in his posture, she changed the subject.

“Lilly understands the situation, but this was reckless. The Pleasure Quarter is under the direct control of another familia that is *not to be trifled with*. It would be best not to make a scene while searching for your acquaintance.”

The girls’ heads drooped in the wake of Lilly’s sharp warning.

They looked genuinely remorseful for their actions. “For now,” began Welf before the silence became awkward, “we should go somewhere else. Staying in the same place too long here is just asking for trouble.”

Lilly and the others agreed.

Welf turned around to leave, when suddenly—he finally noticed.

“…Hey, where’s Bell?”

“Eh?”

Lilly spun around and couldn’t believe her eyes.

The white-haired boy was nowhere to be seen.

“Did Sir Bell accompany you? He hasn’t been around since you arrived…”

“Yes, not here.”

Mikoto’s and Chigusa’s words confirmed the worst.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl as everyone broke out in a cold sweat.

They were completely surrounded by the din of the Pleasure Quarter. They could clearly hear the voices of the working women less than a block away.

Welf was lost for words as all the color drained from Lilly’s face.

—No way.

* * *

"Th-they're gone…?"

I'm alone in the middle of a street full of strangers.

We were halfway through the street, but I could still see Welf's red head. Then from out of nowhere, "It's Special Playtime!" I got swept up in an avalanche of men—and now I can't find Welf or Lilly.

I fight my way back to a spot I think I recognize, but all that's here is the front of a brothel I haven't seen before. I tried my best to follow…but I'm on my own now.

Did I make a wrong turn somewhere?

Maybe instead of moving I should have waited where I was on the street for Lilly and Welf to find me?

So many faces, but I don't know any of them. Heck, I don't even know where I am.

Lines of brothels made of stone, soft light of magic-stone lamps, and lewd female voices coming from every direction—seductive invitations. Thanks to my Status, my hearing is much stronger than it used to be, to the point that I'm very clearly picking up all these moans and screams coming out of the buildings.

I'm in the middle of the street but my feet won't budge. I wonder what color my face is right now. All the blood drained out a long time ago, but my cheeks and ears are burning.

I don't know if I'm a coward, ashamed, or anxious. There are so many emotions swirling in my head.

As my face goes from pale to flushed red and back again, I feel like I'm standing on the brink of going crazy.

"What have we here? Are you lost, little one?"

"GAH!"

My body jumps at the sudden voice.

I look up and see one with incredible snowy-white skin—one of the ladies of the night, an elf, no less. She's smiling sweetly at me.

Her dress is the same shade of white as her skin. There's a big slit running down the front, all the way to her belly button, showing off her considerable bust. Her beauty and seductive aura make me lose my voice.

"I-I'm fine!" I yell as I break out of her spell, and waste no time running away.

Welf, Lilly, Mikoto?!

Shouting the names of my friends in my head, I race toward anywhere that's not here.

I get off the main road and turn into a narrower alleyway. One of the brothels towers over me. There's so little light back here that I can't tell where the building ends and the night sky begins. Several of the brothel windows are open. Young faces are looking down at me. One beast-girl, who can't be much older than me, leans outside and blows me a kiss. A new wave of heat reaches my face as I nearly fall over.

The atmosphere of this place is strangling me. I have to get out of here, have to escape. Running as fast as I can, I yell at the top of my lungs and race through the Pleasure Quarter.

"Haaa-haaa-haa…!"

Had to stop to catch my breath.

This isn't the Dungeon, but running around like an idiot won't get me anywhere just the same. I have to stop, focus.

Who's looking at me…? Ah, just some guys in the corner over there. I must be a wreck.

I put my hands on my knees and take a few deep breaths. Wiping the sweat from my face, I take a look around.

Where am I…?

All these buildings are completely different from the earlier ones.

A nice change from the stone brothels, it's actually rather bright here.

Did I walk into some kind of festival? Looping around the area, it sure feels like it.

"…Far East design?"

Many tall red gates line the path. Even the design on the pavement looks foreign.

Wooden buildings with highly decorated white walls and red pillars are everywhere. Each of them stands three stories high and is surprisingly colorful. Thick, brick-like tiles cover the roofs of the buildings and the tops of the red gates. This whole area is built in the same way.

If I remember right…this is called a red-light district?

This is the same style as Mikoto's homeland. I remember her descriptions and someone else's, not sure whose, as my eyes scan the area.

That's right…Gramps told me about it. He didn't go into much detail, but these designs match his story perfectly.

The pictures carved into the stone pavement are so inviting, drawing me in. Gramps was right.

Lilly said that the Pleasure Quarter was a mixture of different cultures, all in the same place…

The red-light district—it's not just red lights, it's bright. Of course there are magic-stone lamps all over the place, but there are also balloon-ish lanterns with lit candles inside hanging from the gates. They cast soft spotlights on the men and women passing beneath. The women, w-working ladies, are wearing something that looks like a robe but with a lot more folds. A kimono…Traditional clothing of the Far East.

Trees called ajura are planted on each side of a wide path. These blue flowering plants grow only in the Dungeon, so they must've been brought up here. The most amazing thing about them is that they are always in bloom, no matter the season. A few of the sky-blue petals are scattered over the stone walkway. If I remember right, real cherry blossom trees are white and pink—but they're exactly the same shape. The Pleasure Quarter may be a melting pot of cultures, but there's no doubt that this spot is meant to be the Far East.

I look forward, admiring the blue blossoms, when I see something out of the corner of my eye.

The first floor of one of the brothels. Several young women dressed in kimonos are lined up in a room facing the street.

Heavily accessorized, they're calling out to people on the street, trying to lure customers. It seems to be working. There's a group of about six or seven men standing outside, their eyes gliding over every inch of the girls, trying to find one who suits their fancy. One of the men steps up to the waist-high wooden fence separating the girls from the street, beckons one of them forward, and then disappears into the entrance after exchanging one or two words.

I keep walking forward, taking in the mix of races lined up behind that wooden fence.

I accidentally make eye contact with the girl seated at the end of the room.

"…"

Her golden hair sparkles around green eyes.

She's an animal person of some kind. Wide, round ears at the top of her head and a bushy tail the same color as her hair give that away.

Based on the shapes of her ears and tail alone, I'd say she's a fox person.

—A renart.

This is the first time I've ever seen one.

They're an extremely rare race that mostly lives in the Far East.

Even among all the other young women and gorgeous ladies, her beauty stands out. For lack of a better word, she's cute.

Clad in a flowing red kimono, she's sitting behind the other working ladies. There's a black choker around her neck…No, I think that's a collar.

My feet come to a stop so that I can admire those amazing green eyes.

Vast as the night sky, they look at me with a twinge of envy and longing, a desire to be on the other side of the wooden fence.

Her lips spread without her looking away. A sad smile.

The other women around her are laughing, jeering, and full of energy. But she's so different from them, fascinatingly so. I can't take my eyes off her.

Her eyelids quiver, like she's on the verge of tears. But that smile of hers is making time stand still.

It lasted only a second, but I wouldn't be surprised if we'd been staring at each other for almost a minute.

"—Well, well, if it isn't Bell!"

Tap. I jump in surprise as a hand touches my shoulder.

My head whips around. There, staring back at me, is an orange-haired, orange-eyed deity.

"L-Lord Hermes?!"

"Ha-ha, I thought that was you."

Hermes flashes a toothy grin, clearly enjoying my reaction.

His face morphs into his usual dandy smile, eyes shining back at me from just above mine. I've never seen him without Miss Asfi, but she isn't here. Perhaps Lord Hermes is by himself?

He's dressed in his usual traveler's clothes, except now he's got a feathered hat on his head and a small pouch over his shoulder.

"Imagine, meeting you here. Hee-hee, you've grown up so quickly."

"Eh…No, it's not that. I have a perfectly good explanation…!"

"Saw you taking a gander at the gallery. See anything you like?"

Lord Hermes looks over my head at the lineup of girls behind the wooden fence. I'm glad he looked away because my face is burning again. He's got the wrong idea. I follow his line of sight back toward the gallery, as he called it, but the renart is hidden behind the ones coming up to the fence.

The two of us spend several seconds watching the transactions take place. "Do you want some pointers on how to get a good one?" he asks with a grin.

"N-n-no thank you!" I yell back at him.

If I don't change the subject now, who knows what will happen. Forgetting about the renart for the time being, I turn away from the lineup.

"Eh, um…So Lord Hermes, why are you here? And what's…what's in the pouch…?"

"Now, now, Bell. Invasive questions are a no-no in this place."

He lowers the brim of his hat to hide half his face, but I can still see that toothy grin.

…He snuck away from Miss Asfi. That realization sends a wave of cold sweat down my back. And he dodged the question about what is in the pouch over his shoulder.

"I'd like you to keep the fact I was here a secret between us. Agreed?" Lord Hermes leans in real close to me as he speaks.

"S-sure…" is all I can say in response.

On the other hand…I think having this conversation has settled me down a bit.

There's nothing like the relief of seeing a familiar face. Thanks to him, the feeling of being strangled by the atmosphere in the Pleasure Quarter is gone.

Now to ask him how to get out of here.

"To think, the Bell I know would come to the Pleasure Quarter on his own…"

But before I can ask, a dangerous smile that I know all too well appears on his face as he wraps his arm around my shoulders.

"L-Lord Hermes?"

"I'm happy you discovered the wonders of this place. Of course, you came here in secret as well, I assume?"

"No, I…Lord Hermes, this is just a misunderstanding!"

I try desperately to convince him that I'm not here to take part in the "fun," but Lord Hermes keeps going.

"No need to be embarrassed. Hestia won't hear a thing out of me.—Here, a parting gift."

All my efforts in vain, Hermes opens his pouch and thumbs through it.

One of his cheeks pulls back into an evil grin as he hands me a small bottle.

It’s roughly the size and shape of a chess piece. There’s a thick red liquid sloshing around inside.

“Wh-what is this?”

“An aphrodisiac.”

—A what?! I nearly cough up a lung.

“So long, Bell! I hope you enjoy your night as much as I enjoy mine!”

“Wait, Lord Hermes!”

I catch another glimpse of that smile as he moves away.

“I-I don’t want this!” I yell as I take off after him, the bottle of love juice in my hand.

I can’t be alone again! It’ll be even worse if I’m carrying this thing by myself, too! I don’t have the courage to put it in a pocket, but I can’t just throw it away. Someone might see it and get the wrong idea! What am I supposed to do?

I follow that feathered hat through the crowd like this bottle’s a ticking time bomb and he is the only one who can stop it. He knows his way around here; the feather dips in and out of my sight at every turn. I pick up speed in a desperate attempt to stay close.

Completely focused on returning the bottle to him, we leave behind the Far East red-light district and travel through more dark alleyways.

“—Whoa!”

And when I follow Lord Hermes around the corner—

A person comes at me from the other direction. I turn the corner with such vigor that I nearly run into her.

“Watch it.”

I kick off the ground and manage to avoid hitting the surprised woman head-on, using my Agility to limit contact to just grazing her shoulder.

I can’t lose Lord Hermes, but I can’t leave without apologizing. I spin on my heel and try to get back on his tail as quickly as possible.

“S-sorry about that! Are you okay…?”

Words leave me the moment I get a good look at the woman I nearly crashed into.

The first thing to greet my eyes is a pair of long, beautifully chiseled legs.

Smooth muscle lines and curves work their way up to her hips. I don't think a master sculptor could design something more sleek and beautiful than these.

The woman isn't wearing much in way of clothing. She does have one purple band of cloth around her chest that's somehow containing cleavage large enough to rival Lady Hestia's. Her shoulders and stomach are completely exposed. As for her legs, they're covered by a sheer fabric that's not much thicker than a veil…I can clearly see her thighs, along with every other feature of those amazing legs, right through it. It's hard for me to believe, but she's barefoot. She does have quite a few accessories, though, especially around her neck and wrists.

She's taller than me, at least 170 celch.

Her black, untied hair reaches all the way down past her hips. Her muscles are one thing, but her coppery skin could truly make most men's blood run cold.

An Amazon in dancer's clothing—and she's working here.

"…So sorry, but I'm in a rush. So, well, um…good-bye!"

Out of all the women I've seen today, she is easily one of the most attractive. I can't breathe, and I've got to get away.

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Her allure is so intimidating that I can't articulate my words at all. My cheeks burning hot enough to start a fire, I manage to squeeze a few more words about following Lord Hermes out of my constricted throat and turn to leave.

"Hold it."

But before I can take another step and start screaming again…

Her fingers wrap around my elbow.

"Eh?"

"You're a new face."

She pulls my body against hers and wraps her other arm around my waist.

I'm being held—no, pressed—against her. Her eyes lock onto mine.

"…?!"

She stares deep into my eyes in the middle of the street.

I can't move. Every inch of my body feels like it's on fire. The muscles in her thighs push against me through my pants, her toned abs press against my shirt, and in some places, we're skin against skin. Moist lips are just in front of my nose. I'm sure I'd see a tremendous valley of cleavage if I looked down.

How can my body be generating this much heat but my arms and legs feel cold? I'm freezing and burning at the same time.

"Nnn?"

She doesn't seem the least bit self-conscious. She lifts her left hand off my back and pinches my cheek.

Forcing my head up, she looks down on me with powerful eyes, lips poised to devour me at any moment.

Those eyes, it feels like they're eating me alive…She smiles.

"Ahhh…Ain't that a tempting face you've got there."

She licks her red lips.

I audibly shiver as a cold chill rushes down my spine.

"You have a name? Mine's Aisha."

"Eh…Um, well…"

"How 'bout buying a night with me?"

She leans in real close to my ear. I can feel her warm breath running down my neck.

A mixture of fear and embarrassment courses through my veins. I'll break in half at this rate.

No, this is bad. How can I get out of here?! My instincts finally kick in and I start to struggle, but…

—I can't break away!

There's only an arm wrapped around my waist and one around my shoulder. But her grip is too strong.

A grip strong enough to contain me after I just ranked up to Level 3—that means…

This woman has Falna like me?

"Easy there," says Aisha with a confident laugh as she tightens her arms around me.

Incredible physical strength and tenacity paired with overwhelming beauty. She's the physical embodiment of everything Amazons are known for.

"The crop was pitiful tonight."

"Do I smell the blood of a virgin man?"

"Who's that, Aisha?"

Voices from behind me, appearing one after another.

More figures to the left and right—more Amazons.

I chance a look in both directions. Just as I feared, more beautiful, scantily clad women are coming this way.

"Found him right here. Got quite the innocent look in his eyes, don't he?"

"Haven't seen a man like that in ages."

"Fu-fu, first time in the Pleasure Quarter?"

The woman…Aisha probably came out looking for customers when I nearly ran into her. I think these other Amazons are doing the same thing. They surround me before I know what is happening.

Being Amazons, their clothing is similar to Aisha's, though some are wearing even less than she. Trapped in Aisha's embrace, I can see only sun-kissed skin in every direction. Mind racing, I feel like I'm going to pass out.

Moments later…

I see one of the Amazons' shoulders jump.

"Hey, hang on a minute. This human boy…Isn't he that Little Rookie?"

Suddenly, everyone stops moving. A breeze travels through the now silent alleyway.

"—White hair, red eyes."

"The one who defeated Hyacinthus in the War Game…?"

“The fastest adventurer to ever reach Level Three?”

I know that people all over Orario watched the War Game through Divine Mirrors. So it should come as no surprise that someone might recognize my face…But still.

I can hear them whispering among themselves, all their eyes glued onto my head.

The strongest stare of all is coming from directly above me—Aisha’s.

—Her aura, it changed.

Before, she seemed to be having a bit of fun tormenting me. But now her already overwhelming eyes have a different kind of twinkle to them.

The others, too, they’re looking at me like a piece of fresh meat on a skewer.

The playful atmosphere of a moment ago is gone…Sweat is pouring off my body like a waterfall.

This must be how a rabbit feels when it’s surrounded by a pack of hungry wolves.

But these aren’t just wolves. These are lionesses and tigresses, saliva dripping off their bared fangs. They’re licking their lips, hunger in their eyes.

“Eeeek…” A pitiful sound escapes my gawking mouth, eyes wide open.

I-I have to run. A heartbeat later—

WHOOSH!! All of them come at me at once.

“About time a strong one came along!”

“Hey, I’ll show you a good time!”

“Ignore these weaklings, come with me!”

A tsunami of Amazons washes over me.

Shoulders, arms, clothing, hair, legs—their hands grab everything. My body contorts in all directions, pulled by their incessant grasps. None of their dark hands are letting go.

“Ouch, ow, oww, OW, OWWWWW!!”

I’m completely helpless as these Amazonian women come agonizingly close to tearing me to pieces.

There’s no hope of escape anymore. I can’t see anything except for tanned curves and occasional flashes of bright fabric.

My head starts getting foggy. I can’t even scream as I’m buried under mountains of feminine muscle. Until—*shloop*.

Something gives my outstretched arm a strong pull.

"—I found this one first, he's my prey. No one else can have him."

Aisha pulls me free of the other Amazons' feeding frenzy and is holding me tightly against her hefty chest.

"Buohhh! Buohh!" I struggle to catch my breath with nose and mouth pressed deep into her cleavage.

She's moving, spinning like a hurricane. The other hands let go, one by one. I chance a look straight up, trying to ignore my predicament. The eyes of a lioness glare down at me, her "fangs" bared in an ominous grin.

My face is free! I manage to gasp for air by prying myself away from her chest.

"P-please hear me out! I-I-I'm not here to do anything amorous. Th-the only reason I came this way was to look for my friend. S-s-she's from my familia! But I got lost, s-s-so please…!"

I start pleading with her, with them, after putting a little distance between us.

But it isn't enough. The Amazon is really fast, and she circles around behind me with ease. *Whap!* She grabs an item that was still somehow in my hand.

"Oh, really? Then why are you ready for a *long haul*, eh?"

The bottle…The one that was forced on me by a particular deity. The aphrodisiac.

Lord Hermes…!!!!!!!!!

My soul silently screams. For some reason, an image of the god tipping his feathered hat and giving me a thumbs-up appears in my head.

There's no way she'll listen to me now…

"Drop the act already. Now, come."

"H-hold on a sec. H-hey, wait!"

She locks my arm into her stranglehold grip and pulls me away.

The other lions, tigers, and wolves form a pack around us. I'm in the middle of a parade of shiny-eyed Amazons…!

This is the first time since following Lord Hermes out of the red-light district that I've had a chance to look around. This area looks like an oasis in the middle of a desert. The buildings are mostly made of stone, but the roofs and eves are covered in a style of sun-dried bricks. The outsides of some brothels are decorated with high-quality alabaster. As for the working ladies around here, most are wearing something similar to Aisha's dancer's clothes. The style is different, but they're showing off just as much skin.

"It's not like that! Please, just listen to me!" My yelling and screaming on the verge of tears do nothing to persuade my captor. I got lucky before, but now I can't shake loose.

What's worse, I can tell from the earlier whirlpool tug-of-war that at least some of the people in our twenty-plus Amazonian entourage are Level 2, or even Level 3.

I'm so caught up wallowing in my own despair that it takes me a moment to realize we've come to a stop in front of an extremely large building.

Judging from the exterior and amount of scantily clad ladies around it, this is also a brothel—the size of a palace.

It looks like it came right out of a fairy tale set in some mystical desert. Covered in sheets of pure gold, the design is so heavenly that I wouldn't be surprised if the architect based it on a heatstroke-induced mirage.

An emblem comes into view as Aisha pulls me even closer to the circular structure.

A naked woman's body hidden by a veil…The symbol of prostitutes.

This is a familia's base of operations? Their home?

Another tug from Aisha and we cross the threshold of a large wooden door.

"Is…is this a castle…?"

The inside of the palace sparkles just as much as the outside.

It bears an uncanny resemblance to the inside of Babel Tower, except that the inside is open like a multilayered doughnut. There are men on all the different levels, arm in arm with their chosen partners for this evening. Couples are disappearing into rooms every second.

Aisha guides me through the unbelievably wide entrance hall. Expensive-looking vases line the white walls, but my eyes keep getting drawn to the red carpet beneath my feet.

The atmosphere in here is even more suffocating than the Pleasure Quarter. The mixture of obscene smells makes every nerve in my body shriek with anxiety. I'm surprised I'm still conscious, let alone walking under my own power.

"Do you seriously know nothing?"

Aisha looks back at me, her prisoner, with a hint of glee in her eyes.

"This is our home, Belit Babili."

Her grip stays just as tight as she explains.

"Don't go thinkin' it's just this building, either. This whole area is our island…Lady Ishtar's territory."

Lady…Ishtar?

I don't know many gods and goddesses, but I've heard that name somewhere before…

"You girls, down there. Why aren't you working?"

A sharp female voice stabs down from far above.

I look up without even thinking. What I see takes my breath away.

It's a beautiful figure who just oozes temptation. Wearing next to nothing at all, her absolutely radiant tan skin is almost blinding even from this distance. She's decorated her body with a ton of golden trinkets, including a crown, earrings, a necklace, bracelets, anklets, and even some things hanging extravagantly from her breasts. Everything about this lady screams *queen*.

Her dark, almost purplish hair hangs down to her waist in several braids.

She's looking at us, a long pipe in her left hand.

—A Goddess of Beauty.

I know immediately.

Anyone who sets eyes on one instantly gets filled with incredible desire; their charms are too alluring to resist.

I've met a goddess like that before, the silver-haired Lady Freya. I felt bewitched the moment I saw her. Her beauty wafted into me like the most provocative perfume, overriding all my other senses before I knew what was happening.

The Amazonian ladies say hello in unison. I clear my throat.

"Mind explaining that human?"

Her eyes, glinting like amethyst in the distance, lock onto me. My whole spine trembles under their pressure.

The other Amazons seem to have noticed that, too, and immediately move to shield me from the deity's sight.

"Don't look at him, Lady Ishtar!"

"What're we supposed to do with someone under your spell, eh?"

They're protecting me…?

"And you, keep your eyes down!" Aisha's warning makes me say, "O-o-okay?" and do exactly that. The hands of the others are back, holding me down. I'm trapped in their whirlpool again, except this time I can hear the voices of the other ladies, young and mature, wafting out of random rooms all the way up to the top floors.

"Fu-fu…There's more money to be made tonight. All of you better not waste your time by sucking that one dry."

Her nasal laughter cuts through it all as the Amazons pull me in the same direction. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway; I'm already falling to pieces.

"Tammuz," she says in a bored voice, and breaks off eye contact. I risk a glance in her direction and see a rather handsome young man follow Lady Ishtar away from the upper-floor railing.

So it's true…This is Ishtar Familia*'s home…*

My hair's a mess, clothing in tatters, but I know for sure.

They've increased their presence and effectiveness in the Dungeon, becoming one of Orario's best Dungeon-prowling familias in the past few years…at least that's what I've heard.

I've come to a really dangerous place, in more ways than one. I'm a member of a rival familia, deep in enemy territory. All the repercussions start racing through my head as Aisha forcibly leads me deeper into their mansion of a home.

We pass several more women, ones wearing dresses so sheer that I can see right through them. Aisha calls them over and I look straight at the floor. My captor must be pretty high up in the familia. She exchanges a few words with the women, who are thankfully ignoring me. Next thing I know, they're gone and I'm being led up to the third floor.

The stairwell opens to a wide, highly decorated hallway. Two of the Amazons rush ahead and open a pair of double doors right in front of me. Aisha pushes me inside.

"Uwoah?!"

Suddenly released from her viselike grip, I'm practically thrown onto a sofa covered with a velvet sheet.

Plop! Good thing it's a soft sofa…I quickly sit up and have a look around the dim room.

There are several of these sofas scattered around the room, but almost no people. The only light is coming from a magic-stone lamp on the low table and a few candles on the wall. There's a weird smell about this place—high-quality perfume and…

"That's musk aromatics."

Aisha notices my flaring nostrils and grins as she takes a seat on the sofa across from me.

The rest of the entourage rushes around the room, grabbing any chairs they can find and sitting in a ring around me.

I can see another man across the way. He's standing at a counter across from another woman wearing one of those sheer dresses. She must be serving drinks, or at least some kind of alcohol for sure. All the seating, a bar—this classy room has to be some kind of waiting area.

"All the rooms are in use at the moment, so we're goin' to chill here for the time being.

"Or we could start right now, if you like?" she adds with that same hungry smirk.

I don't have the guts to ask her, "Start what?"

"I call second." "Aisha, just let me have a taste!" All their eyes are on me. All the Amazonian women are sitting down, but it feels like they're circling me. My first impressions of them are feeling more and more real by the moment. I shiver as thin fingers run down my neck from behind, making my heart jump. It takes all the courage I have to try to speak.

"I'm um…in another familia…Isn't it kind of bad for me to be here, in your home? So, so you see…"

"Don't mean a thing. We bring adventurers up here almost every night.

"Some more willingly than others," she adds, not letting me get in another word. So some of the other customers are adventurers. However, no one seems to care at all.

They're literally sleeping with the enemy.

"'Course if you want to have at it, fine by me. In here, in bed, I'll take you on wherever, whenever."

Thud! She puts her leg on the table between us. It really sounds like she wants to fight.

I'm at a loss for words. They're completely unarmed and no one's here to protect them, either. These scantily clad women are much more dangerous than they seem.

They're temptresses, but also warriors.

Many of them were strong enough to leave bruises on my arms and legs with their bare hands. I'm the one who needs a bodyguard, not them.

"Berbera"—I don't know where I heard that first, but it's a fitting name.

They all have Blessings from Lady Ishtar—seductive adventurers…

Doing my best to hold my fear at bay, I take a closer look at Aisha.

She's everything I imagined an Amazon would be. Overflowing with confidence, she shows no hesitation or weakness and commands a lot of respect. Bold and beautiful, she must be the heart and soul of this group.

Okay, here goes nothing.

"Wh-what can I do to convince you to…let me go home?"

This place is a completely different world, not to mention the home of another familia. To top it all off, my body won't stop shaking in fear.

Can't calm down, out of place, scared as hell. Tears are already leaking out of my eyes, every fiber of my being stressed to the limit.

"…"

Aisha runs her fingers through her hair while listening to my plea.

Another woman walks up to the ring of Amazons, carrying a glass with a dark liquid inside. She must be some kind of waitress. Squeezing through a very small opening in the ring, she places the glass on the table in front of Aisha.

The Amazon reaches forward, snatches the glass of expensive-looking wine, and downs it in two gulps.

"We are the harlots of Lady Ishtar. The best brothel is at our disposal…But we Amazons play by our own rules."

My captor ignores the question and rotates the now empty glass between her fingers.

I shrink away from her, but she just grins and leans forward.

"We refuse to wait quietly at home for a strong male to come our way. We go and find one."

I tilt my head in confusion. She cocks an eyebrow and leans in farther, close enough to whisper in my ear.

"Amazons have needs. We take our men…*and devour them.*"

Resistance is futile—those words send another wave of cold sweat down my back.

Amazons.

They have the reputation of being aggressive hand-to-hand fighters. There are several different clans from all over the world. Each has mastered a different type of martial art.

Out of all five races of demi-human, they look the most like us humans. However, despite their appearance, they're physically capable of bearing only female children. They're unique in that way. Every child born from an Amazonian mother is another Amazon. Half-Amazons don't exist.

In other words, they need the cooperation of a male, any male, to reproduce.

Cooperation might be a strong word. They tend to kidnap their prospective partners before *going all out*…There are stories about them dating back to the Ancient Times, about the terror they caused before the gods and goddesses came to earth. Men of any age, married or not, living away from the cities were at risk of being taken and returning a shell of their former selves.

The clan of females would relentlessly pursue a male who piqued their interest, like predators out for blood.

Those instincts are alive and well within every Amazon.

And I have been *taken*.

They weren't planning on asking my opinion from the start.

"Get used to it."

I'm absolutely petrified. Aisha delivered the final verbal blow.

The ring around us is cackling like hyenas, licking their lips and grinning.

—I'm so dead.

I don't think there's enough blood left in my face to blush anymore. My whole body was burning up not too long ago, but now my skin is ice-cold.

"…?"

I'm too distracted by the knowledge of my fate destroying my soul from within to notice that Aisha has looked up and away from me.

The ring follows suit. Each of the Amazons looks in the same direction, a mixture of concern and fear on their faces. It's at that point that I emerge from the abyss of despair and notice something strange is going on.

Feet, lots of them, running this way.

"What do we do, Aisha? Phryne is coming!"

Another Amazon throws open the double doors and bursts into the room.

Every set of eyes in this room immediately locks onto the look of desperation on her face.

Phryne…?

That's a cute name…so why is everyone scared stiff?

"Get over here!" "Hide, now!" Aisha pulls me off the couch—but it gets here first.

BOOM! The doors fly off their hinges.

The Amazons closest to the door flinch to protect themselves. I'm just as surprised as all of them.

"—I smell a young'eeeen!"

Nostrils open wide and breathing deep, *she* appears.

A massive woman, she stands at least two meders tall. She's wearing a black outfit that looks vaguely like hunting gear. Her scrawny arms and legs are pure muscle and wheat colored. Considering the rest of her body looks like a boulder, her tiny limbs don't make much sense.

At the same time, her head is much too big.

It looks like there's a black mushroom or something on her head…Wait, that's hair?! With beady eyes and really long lips, she looks more like a bullfrog than a human.

M-monster?!

That was really rude of me to think; I only just met her. But this is really shocking.

Don't know why, but for some reason I can see an equally shocked look on Gramps's face in the back of my mind.

"Kee-kee-kee-kee! So you caught yourself a man, Aishaaa?"

The massive blob of a woman—or rather, Amazon—walks through the wide-open doorway and into the waiting room.

Even her voice sounds like a croaking frog's. Aisha snaps her tongue at her.

"Why are you here, Phryne?"

"A little bird told me you'd found a delicious little one. I just had to see for myself.

"So show me," the Amazon named Phryne says, a little more forcefully.

Then she starts walking straight toward us. There are sofas and tables in the way, but she doesn't even pause. She plows right through them, not even slowing down.

The Amazons are standing like a wall between her and me, but now she's close enough to see over their heads. Her long lips curl into a horrific smile.

"Well, if it isn't *Hestia Familia*'s bunny rabbit! A little raw for my taste but…definitely my type!"

Her cheeks and bulging chin wrinkle as her lips spread even wider. It's making my skin crawl.

"GE-GE-GE-GEGEGEH!!" Laughing again, her eyes twinkle like distant stars.

"Bending that fresh body to my will, messing up that cute little face…I'm gonna have fun tonight."

—I'm so, so dead.

Cold dread floods my veins. Can't breathe. Come to think of it, I got the same feeling from Lord Apollo…

Standing tall, Aisha leads the Amazons as one to block her path.

"Let me have a li'l fun, Aishaaa. I'll give 'im right back."

"Who do you think I am? I caught him. He's my prey; get your own."

Aisha isn't backing down from…Miss Phryne? In fact, she looks ready to fight.

Not just her, either. Her ring of followers is all on their feet, muscles flexing as if itching for a throwdown.

Every one of them is an Amazon in the same familia, but I'd never believe that if I didn't see the events unfolding before my very eyes.

I get the feeling that something big is about to happen…but I'm more worried about my own hide. Alarms are still blaring inside my head.

"All the males I've had recently couldn't entertain me. Been bored as hell. So why not let me indulge?"

"Go back to your lair. Can't count how many men you've wasted—you ain't getting mine."

They're standing about five meders apart. I'd fear for the life of anyone stuck in the no-man's-land between the two Amazonian powerhouses.

Aisha's tone is harsh and cold. Phryne responds in kind, not holding anything back.

"So, beauty is a sin, now? It's not my fault that no other woman can measure up…Lady Ishtar comes close, but I'm out of her league."

She's serious…!

"It's your fault adventurers won't come anywhere near this place. Catching the good ones takes time, energy. Read the writing on the wall, toad."

"Ooooo, jealousy, how scaaary. I just happen to be the perfect match of beauty and power, wretched varmint."

All my joints are shaking, even my toes, as I listen to the two Amazons argue. I can feel it—Phryne is the real deal.

It's been easier to tell after ranking up myself.

I'm starting to sense the size of a person's spiritual "container" for their Status.

The strongest one here is Phryne, quite possibly overwhelmingly so.

It's the same kind of pressure I feel from *top-class adventurers,* from *her.*

Aisha and the rest of the Amazons don't take Phryne's taunts lightly. Fists are clenching, shoulders are flexing, even the air in here feels like it's crackling. The other people in the waiting room hadn't paid much attention to the large woman's arrival until now. Now they're tripping over themselves, making a break for the open door.

Could it be…?

All of them are so angry with one another, staring down their opponent, that no one is looking at me. This is my chance! Carefully, quietly, I start taking small steps back and escape from the ring.

I have to get away…Slowly but surely, the space between us is growing.

"GaaHHH—so pointless! I've taken him by force."

My eyes shoot open the moment those words reach my ears. My window's closing!

"We are proud Amazons! We take whatever man we see fit! Ain't that right, Aishaaa?"

"…"

"Why not settle things *our* way…or are you scaaared?"

The massive woman breaks into more frog-like laughter. Aisha spits at her opponent's feet.

"…Bring it on, toad."

The challenge accepted, Aisha and the rest of the Amazons turn around.

There's only about ten steps in the space between us. Every single set of eyes is burning with enough ferocity to cook an egg.

The warning bells have officially become sirens. I don't think there's a dry part of skin anywhere on my body. Haven't been able to stop sweating since I got here, but the flow just kicked into high gear.

One of them just licked her lips at me.

"First one to reach him keeps him!"

That's the signal.

All the Amazons and I take off at the sound of Phryne's deep bellow of a yell.

I spin on my heel and take off toward the back of the room.

Amazonian battle cries sounding behind me, I set my sights on a window and speed up.

Everything's in slow motion, all sound taking an agonizingly long time to reach my ears. The footsteps, the yells, the sound of furniture being crushed. Seconds feel like hours. The night sky outside the window beckons in front of me.

Keeping my eyes open, I kick off the floor and plow through the glass window, shoulder first.

I'm outside, in midair.

A race of life and death is now under way. The Amazons are on the hunt.

* * *

Falling. Night air cold on my sweaty skin.

I listened to the roar of my instincts and jumped out that window with no hesitation. Now I'm zipping through the air.

No need to look; I know the Amazons are following me. I could feel their presence before I heard them on the ground beneath me. What's worse, the wall shattered behind them. Shards of glass and rock debris are raining down on the street below. *THUD!* I make my landing.

I take off running.

"Hold it!"

I barely have time to take one breath before the voice of one angry temptress cuts through the night.

Leaving Belit Babili in my dust, I make a break for the Pleasure Quarter.

And so it is that my death race with more than twenty Amazonian warriors is officially under way.

Magic-stone lamps zip by my line of vision as I tear through the backstreet. Men and women hug the walls, their eyes wide open as they see us coming. “EEEEKK!” One working lady jumps out of the way in the nick of time.

“After him!” “Don’t let him escape!” I can hear them yelling, but I’m too scared to take a look. All I can do is keep pumping my arms, pushing forward, forward, forward!

Why did this happen to me?!

Was it because I didn’t listen to Lilly and Welf and go home sooner? Or maybe it’s my fault because I got separated? Lord Hermes isn’t off the hook, either.

I round a corner, my head still trying to find an answer to an impossible question. Another corner, another turn. I zigzag through steadily narrowing streets in an attempt to lose my pursuers once and for all.

I think my random pattern is paying off. I can’t hear the Amazons anymore.

“—GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH!!”

Except for her.

She’s the only one my Level 3 Agility can’t outrun.

Her croaking echoes off the walls. A long shadow falls over me.

It grows bigger and bigger in the moon’s blue light behind me. She’s coming from above?!

“Uw-UWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

A dark-colored boulder slams into the street just in front of me, sending debris everywhere.

Somehow managing to kill her momentum, the absolutely monstrous woman—Phryne—pulls her meaty fists out of the street before turning to face me.

“You’re not getting away, little bunny!”

She charges, the space between us disappearing in an instant. A plump hand comes straight at my eyes.

Duck! I yell at myself and just barely manage to dodge. I can hear the wind being torn to shreds as her now outstretched fingers pass by my ear. My feet stumble backward in the sudden gust of wind generated by that near-miss.

My eyes open as wide as they go the instant I see Phryne’s merciless follow-up attack coming my way.

I barely manage to jump to the side as her fist takes a chunk out of the wall of the brothel behind me. Her other arm follows as I manage to take cover behind a barrel in the street. Off-balance, her third punch barely grazes the side of it. But that's enough to make it burst into splinters. She's empty-handed, but even still she has more than enough power to rip my head off! There's been no time to catch my breath.

Th-this speed, this power…!

This is exactly how it was in those days on the city wall, during my intense training with that other Amazonian girl and my idol.

I was right—she's a top-class adventurer!

Bits of wood and stone are flying everywhere. Sweat flings off my body at each twist and turn. She drives me back farther and farther, until finally getting ahold of my collar.

"AEEEEHH!"

"Hold still alreadyyy!!"

She swings my body up in a full arc and slams me down back-first onto the ground.

A burst of pain shoots through every bone in my body. She loses her grip, sending me tumbling down the road.

I get my bearings and raise my head, only to see Phryne careening toward me.

Her black shadow growing by the second, the putrid smile on her long lips is so horrid that I forget to breathe.

"""Stop, toad!"""

The other Amazons have arrived. Three of them slam feetfirst into Phryne while she's in midair. All two meders of the massive woman suddenly disappear from my line of sight.

WHAM!! Phryne slams into the wall but she screams, "Outta my wayyy!"

She knocks all three of the attacking Amazons clear across the street with a single flick of her arm.

"GAAHHH!"

I finally take a deep breath, coughing in the process. More and more Amazons appear from the roofs of the other brothels, jumping down and engaging Phryne in combat one after another.

"Keep that idiot busy!"

They keep raining down on her. A flurry of kicks and punches is keeping the massive woman from regaining her feet.

It feels like I'm watching a party of adventurers keeping a largecategory monster at bay. Phryne bellows once again as the Amazons wrap their arms around her neck, shoulders, and legs.

They're breaking both familia and racial alliances for their prey—me. "Hyeeee…!" A pitiful sound escapes my throat.

"You're mine!"

"DAHH!"

I'm still sitting on the street, trying to catch my breath, when another Amazon drops down from overhead.

I force my body off the ground and dart forward to escape her trap.

"Ahhh, he got away!"

"I don't mind if he escapes. Just don't let Phryne have him!"

Now several of the Amazons are on my tail. They've split up, one group on Phryne and the rest coming after me. My lungs are on fire, but there's no time to breathe.

Several male customers on the street ahead of me turn in to another street or take cover to avoid trouble as I race down the long alleyway.

"—You're not going anywhere."

"?!"

Aisha?!

She's been following me on the rooftops! As she jumps down from out of nowhere, I see one of her long legs stretch high above her head.

It's a perfect ambush. Even though I manage to block her kick with my right arm, it's powerful enough to knock me off balance.

Not good! I yell at myself as I force myself backward to gain some distance. Unfortunately, her long legs didn't give me the time.

Another kick is already heading my way—it reaches out like a long scythe and catches my shoulder.

Flying forward, I see her body flow like water as she prepares to launch another one of her ranged attacks with legs that could pass as swords. I'm caught in the middle of a deadly dance.

Martial arts?!

One leg on the ground. The other one is high over me, coming down hard heel-first. I roll out of the way, but she's already airborne and spinning.

Spinning down! Both her hands hit the ground as both her legs whip through the air.

I can't predict her movements—I can't defend!

The prowess of one Amazonian warrior, not to mention sharp kicks from her long legs, has me pinned down.

One moment those deadly appendages are being thrust at me like swords, the next she's whipping them around like clubs. I don't have enough arms to block everything—the moment I lean down to protect my head and upper body, she undercuts everything with a low sweep.

"UWAH!"

I fall, hitting my back on the stone pavement once again.

"You're mine."

Pain, lots of pain. The stars in front of my eyes fade in time for me to see Aisha swing a leg over my chest and straddle me.

I've got to be pale as a ghost by now. She leans down, long hair brushing across my face. I'm completely pinned.

She wets her lips, smiling like she enjoys inflicting pain, and reaches for the collar of my shirt.

"Aisha, look out!"

An out of breath yet desperate warning echoes in the night.

At that very moment, *an Amazonian woman hurtles through the air* and slams into Aisha.

It knocks her off my chest. I can't believe my eyes. That poor woman is still tumbling through the street. I don't even know her name.

Aisha groans next to me as she tries to recover. I turn my head to look in the direction that the other woman came from.

"OUTTA MY WAYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY YYYY!"

Big mistake. That's an image that will give me nightmares.

A group of Amazons are lined up, making a wall. However, Phryne breaks through by grabbing two of the unfortunate ladies, one in each hand. The moment I happened to catch a glimpse of was when she burst through, two women in her clutches and the rest in various stages of being trampled or launched toward the walls.

She's throwing women around like projectiles…Now even my cheeks are shaking.

"That damn toad!"

Aisha growls from the deepest pits of her soul, her eyes locked onto the incoming monstrosity.

Which means she's not looking at me. This may be the only chance I get. Forcing all my muscles into action at once, I roll up, forward, and back onto my feet. I hear a frustrated “TCH!” from behind me, but I’m already in a dead sprint. Aisha’s footsteps are echoing behind me, too, but I’m faster.

With the exception of Phryne, I’m faster than any of the Amazons here in terms of pure speed. The gap between us is widening. *Lose them this time…!* I yell inside my head, but…

“Liscia, Eliza! Stop the kid who just entered Third Street!”

Aisha, still on my tail, shouts into the night.

I’ve outrun all the other Amazons, so who is she talking to? Suddenly, two working ladies—an animal person and a human—jump out of buildings on both sides of me.

“Yaaaaaa!”

Even more ladies of the night appear farther down the street, doors opening left and right. “Stop right there!” one of them yells as the rest brandish brooms and frying pans like weapons. What do I do?! THERE! I dart off the main path into a separate back alley, just moments before running into the sudden mob.

“Wh-why?!”

Aisha’s voice sounds again the moment I thought I’d found safety in a new escape route. Exactly the same scene unfolds in front of my eyes: scantily dressed women flood the back alley to bar my path. I yell in despair.

New voices are raining down from above. The brothel windows are open, heads poking out of each one and yelling to one another. “He went that way!” Fifth Street!” “A white-headed adventurer!”

I’ll never be able to get away if they keep shouting where I am! Wait a second, I’ve seen that elf in a white dress before! That long-eared beast girl, too! She’s the one who blew me a kiss earlier! Every one of the women I’ve encountered so far tonight is trying to help the Amazons or get in my way.

What the hell is going on?! I yell inside my head, changing direction yet again. That’s when, even in panicked confusion, I catch a glimpse of the same emblem as before: a naked female body hidden by a veil.

There it is on the side of the brothel, another one engraved in that door, and over there, as well. All these buildings have *Ishtar Familia*’s emblem somewhere.

Don’t tell me…!

A fresh wave of sweat runs down the back of my neck. I know why.

A net that’s far too wide. Lady Ishtar’s fingers reach all over the third district of Orario. All the women working here are members of *Ishtar Familia*, noncombatant and otherwise.

“*This whole area is our island.”* Aisha told me herself, but she was being serious.

It’s as if their home were the castle and all the buildings surrounding it were a town under its protection. This is practically their backyard.

I’m trapped in an area completely under *Ishtar Familia*’s control —their territory!

“Th-this can’t be happening…!”

The interference of the working ladies buys the Amazons enough time to catch up.

What’s worse, the persistent warriors are now equipped with weapons. My only reason for coming out here was to follow Mikoto, so of course I didn’t wear any armor. I have the Divine Knife, but it can’t protect me from an army!

The only item I have on me is Lord Hermes’s aphrodisiac. Absolutely useless!

“Take out his legs!”

“Prepare nets and ropes!”

Arrows hit the street at my feet; boomerangs whiz by my face. I just barely get out of the way of the net before it ensnares a barrel on the street.

This isn’t a race anymore; it’s an all-out battle. The Amazons keep coming, and I don’t know how much of this I can take.

“Samira, cut him off!”

“You owe me one, Aisha!”

Hungry lionesses on the hunt, licking their lips.

I can see it in their eyes—they’re enjoying every moment. The joy of “devouring” after a successful “kill” is written all over their faces.

“We’ll squeeze him dry once we have him! Squeeze until he breaks!”

“At least let me hear him scream!”

I’ll be overrun if I can’t get away from them now.

The moment I lose my strength and slow down, it’s all over. I’ll lose *something* precious.

“GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! There’s no escape!”

Fear, despair, anguish, lamentation, annihilation, deterioration, darkness.

All of them are reaching out, chasing me.

A miserable, horrid, tragic fate awaits me should I fall into their clutches.

Run.

Everything will be over.

Bell Cranell will end at their hands.

Run, run.

Unable to fulfill my dreams, unable to express my deepest wishes.

Every hope I've had, including standing next to *her*, will be completely obliterated, gone forever.

Run, run, run!

With that gone, I won't be able to grow anymore.

I just know.

The person I am now—will be gone forever!!

Run, run, run, run run run ruuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!!

I blaze forward with even more desperation than when I was being chased by the Goliath.

My eyes are wide, most likely bloodshot, and leaking tears. My lungs are in revolt.

Catching a glimpse of my pursuers out of the corner of my eye, I convince my body to pick up speed.

"What's with this guy?!"

"He sped up!!"

"Give up, already!"

I never knew before.

I never knew women could be this scary.

I've always seen the other gender as this sparkling, pure being.

All the women around me have always been so good to me. They spoiled me, and only now do I know the truth.

That's growing up, I guess.

Escape, escape, escape!

Darting out of the way of incoming projectiles and dashing through the streets, my hair whips to and fro with each twist of my body. A white rabbit trying to escape the lion's den.

If the other working ladies are going to block the street, that leaves only one option: the roofs.

I spot a pile of barrels and use them as a springboard to get on top of the closest brothel.

“The boy’s headed to the red-light district!”

I finally gain some distance, with my instincts screaming at me to get away. I barely notice the change in scenery in my high-speed desperation.

The stone buildings of the Pleasure Quarter give way to the tiled roofs of the red-light district.

Red, white, and flowers with blue petals. Anywhere is better than here. I set my course.

Thwak, thwak! More arrows slice through the air behind me. Many lights are flickering on street level. The Pleasure Quarter is still busy. I can lose them in there!

“—GaaHHH!”

I jump toward the cover of people on the opposite block, but I feel the ominous air pressure of an oncoming boomerang arcing right toward my head.

I draw my knife out of reflex and knock away the weapon, but now my momentum’s carrying me in a different direction.

I’m heading directly toward the largest brothel in the red-light district, right next to the main street.

“EH-EKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKKK!”

And right through a second-story window.

Portable and foldable paper dividers, called *shouji* if I remember right, are set up as barriers between rooms—at least they were until a second ago. I fly right through them and tumble past the room and into a wooden hallway. The lady inside was really surprised; my ears are still ringing from her shriek. Her male partner fainted the moment I passed overhead. “S-s-sorry!” I yell over my shoulder as I regain my feet and take off running.

The inside of this brothel is just like the outside, decorated in a Far Eastern style. Sliding doors, called *fusuma,* decorated with gold leaves separate individual rooms from the hallway. I’m pretty sure there’s a party really living it up behind the one on my right. Red pillars and railings flash in and out of view every so often as I keep moving.

A few people poke heads out of the stairwell to see what all the noise is about but immediately disappear the moment they see me charging through. *CRASH! CRASH! CRASH!* The Amazons have arrived, through the windows by the sound of it. The brothel is engulfed in chaos in the blink of an eye.

"This is really bad…!"

More screams as I race past even more rooms. Apologizing as I go, I'm not slowing down for anything. All the Amazons' powerful footsteps are making an avalanche of sound that threatens to overtake me at any second. Ignoring the warriors' random threats and demands, I lead them on a wild chase through the brothel.

If *Ishtar Familia*'s home was worthy of being called a castle, then this place should be called an estate. The part that faces the red-light district isn't all that wide, but this building is surprisingly deep. There are several sections of various sizes all strung together. The scene outside the windows changes dramatically depending on the floor I'm on. Sometimes it's a vast cityscape and others it's a garden or water feature. Every so often I catch a glimpse of a Dungeon Fly—a harmless monster that continuously generates light. *KER-THUNK!* A piece of bamboo set up like a seesaw sitting under a small waterfall fills up with enough water to tilt forward. It strikes a rock, the water flows out, and it resets.

I don't know if it's the confusing layout of this brothel, but the tidal wave of footsteps is gradually thinning to a mere trickle. There was a whole group just behind me a few moments ago, but now there are only two or three at most. I doubt Aisha or Phryne are among them.

At the same time, I've pushed my body beyond its limit.

Running on fumes, I make my way to the deepest part of the brothel.

"G-got to find a hiding place…!"

Gasping for breath, I arrive on the fifth floor and look both ways down the hallway.

Compared to all the ruckus in the other sections, it's eerily quiet here.

"Freeze!" A voice comes from the other end of the hallway.

But this is the end. There's no more hallway on the side. So I quickly open the closest sliding door and duck inside.

"Haa-haa…"

Closing the door behind me, I clutch my chest and gasp for breath. Then, as quietly as I can, I back away from the door.

It's pretty dark in here. No idea what it's for, but that doesn't mean there isn't a good place to hide.

I go deeper into the dark room, my left hand on the wall to guide me…Wait a minute, there's light coming from the other side of that *fusuma*.

I take a quick look over my shoulder to make sure I'm not being followed, take a deep breath, and go inside.

Then…

"I have been awaiting your arrival with great anticipation, master."

An animal person is sitting on her knees on the other side of the *fusuma*.

—It's her…

Long, shimmering golden hair, with matching tail and wide ears on the top of her head.

The absolutely gorgeous red kimono makes it blatantly obvious—she's the renart I saw in the gallery.

I can't take my eyes off the fox ears on top of her head. I might be in shock.

She bows in her sitting position, three fingers outstretched in front of her on the Far Eastern–style bamboo mats. *Tatami*, isn't it? She slowly raises her face. Yep, there's no way I could mistake her for someone else.

"I shall be accompanying you this night. Please address this humble servant as Haruhime."

She looks me in the eyes and says that.

"…Huh?"

"Right this way, master."

She gestures behind her without getting up. That golden fox tail of hers swishes back and forth on top of the *tatami*.

I freeze in place, mouth half open. She rises to her feet and in one quiet, swift motion takes my hand before gently leading me inside.

We pass through another set of golden sliding doors and into another chamber…A futon is laid out on the floor.

"…?!"

Seeing the pillows on it brings me back to my senses.

"Is something the matter?" comes a quiet voice beside my ear.

"Eh, no, w-wait!" Another spark of desperation floods through me, and I trip over my own feet trying to get away.

Losing my balance, I reach out to grab onto a wall but hook my arm around her neck by accident. Both of us tumble onto the futon.

"Eaah…"

I couldn't catch myself in time and land flat on my back on top of the thin floor bed. The back of my head even missed the pillows.

I hear a cute little groan of pain next to my ear. My eyes shoot open as I turn my head to look at her and I open my mouth to apologize…Her large green eyes are looking right through me. Words, they won't come out.

"…"

"…"

She's close enough that I can feel her breath on my face.

On top of me, her left hand is pushing down on my chest. We just lie there, staring into each other's eyes.

Both her cheeks are getting redder by the moment. Neither of us is moving, though, nothing more than bed decorations.

A magic-stone lamp next to the pillows illuminates the right side of her face. She's cute, stunningly so.

She has the air of a beautiful young maiden…who happens to have fox ears. She's not even wearing makeup. Compared to the ravenous and rather violent temptresses I've come in contact with tonight, she seems, I don't know, pure.

In fact, I think she's pretty close to my age. The difference between her and the others is mind-boggling.

"…rst time?"

I was so caught up in those pristine eyes that I barely noticed her lips were moving. She must've sensed the storm raging in my head because now those green orbs look slightly concerned.

"Eh?" I respond, my shoulders shaking. She repeats herself in the same soft voice as before.

"Is this your first time…in a brothel?"

"Yes!"

Her question catches me completely off guard. My voice suddenly comes back to life and bursts from my lips much louder than I expected.

But I quickly cover my mouth with both hands.

The Amazons will find me if I make any noise at all…!

She looks at the desperation on my face, fingers interlocked over my mouth, and tilts her head. I think she misunderstood.

She quietly clears her throat.

"Th-that being the case…I, Haruhime, shall take lead…"

Her eyes change. It's like she's made up her mind but doesn't know if she can. Sitting up, she starts loosening her clothing.

My eyes practically jump from their sockets.

She unravels the thick belt-like sash of her kimono. Different sections of the red fabric fall away from her body.

In no time at all, there's only one thin layer left—practically underwear.

"P-please, wait…!"

"Please be at ease, my master. Entrust…this Haruhime with everything."

"I-I'm not…!"

"Try to relax…!"

My tongue can't handle all these words at the same time. My voice cuts out.

Her pink thighs flash before my eyes. They're nothing compared to her full, curvy breasts. That kimono hid them unbelievably well. A flash of light off her black collar draws my eyes even farther up to the nape of her neck and delicate collarbones. My heart is beating so fast it could shatter any second.

I try protesting again, but she seems to be in her own world. A look of determination overtakes her face as she lifts her leg and straddles me just like Aisha did. I can't move.

"I shall provide you with my services, master…"

A quiver shoots through her ears and down her spine as both hands grab onto my shirt.

My body feels pitifully weak; there's no way I can escape. I try pushing with my arms, arching my back to throw her off, but nothing works.

She unbuttons the top of my shirt—what's left of it anyway—exposing my chest to the light of the magic-stone lamp just above my head.

"……Teh."

In that moment—the almost naked girl pinning me down freezes in place.

FLICK! Her tail shoots straight out and ears stand on end. Her eyes are locked on my chest.

"M-master, master has such a beautiful collarbone!"

Her eyes roll back into her head, and she collapses on top of me with a dull thump.

Wha…WHHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!

My soul screams out as two round lady-pillows fall right on my face. *FMUMM!* I can't breathe!

It's utter chaos in my head, despite the soft skin around my nose and mouth.

Shaking and wiggling my body, I desperately try to get out from underneath the breasts that I didn't know could be so deadly.

"Haruhime, you here?"

?!

They've found me.

A sliding door slams open with a bang and a loud voice echoes through the room. Two sets of footsteps, but I can't see anything with her on top of me like this.

I completely forgot the Amazons were on the hunt. My mind goes blank.

No time to hide—they're right outside the second set of doors. Can't run, can't move. *Wham!* They're here!

Dammit, they're going to be practically on top of me…!

"Haruhime, you seen a scrawny human around…"

I squeeze my eyes shut, bracing for impact. The Amazon's voice trails off, hanging in the air.

Silence. I open my eyes and remember what it must look like from above.

She's mostly naked and on top of me. This would be perfectly normal here, a pair of mostly naked men and women on top of the bed.

To be more precise, a working lady and her customer.

I still can't see anything around the enormous breasts in my face, but that means they can't see me, either. The sound is the echo from the door being slammed open.

"Oh, sorry."

"As you were."

The two Amazons quietly close the door and leave. I can barely hear their footsteps as they go back to the first room chamber.

"To think that Haruhime could pin down a man. Didn't know she had it in her." That Amazon sounds strangely happy as the two of them close the outer sliding doors.

Shifting my head slightly to breathe, I lie there for a good minute before attempting to move again.

I gently guide the girl to the side and place her softly on the futon. At long last, I sit up.

I take a look around while wiping the sweat off my beet-red face with my arm. All clear. Slowly, very slowly, I look down at the girl.

Completely unconscious, her face looks hot enough to boil water. I tilt my head.

“What the hell just happened…?”

◆

“—M-my sincerest apologies!”

The still-blushing renart bows her head.

I couldn’t bring myself to leave the room—the Amazons wandering around are scary as hell, and I can’t just leave an unconscious girl lying there helpless—so I put the covers over her and waited.

Both of us are fully clothed once again. She’s sitting on her knees and bowing as deeply as possible, that fox tail of hers curling behind her.

“For it all to be just…a grave misunderstanding…!”

“Ahh, um, well, I was the one who snuck in here, so…”

I’m sitting away from her, on the *tatami* mats rather than the futon, and blushing just as badly as she is. The most I can do is offer an apology.

Trading apologies with someone I’ve never met before, in a brothel…Well, this is different.

“I thought it strange that my appointed customer had yet to arrive…”

She finally raises her head. Those beautiful green eyes of hers are shaking with embarrassment.

She explains that she waited for a man who never showed up in the first room. So when I came in, she immediately thought I was that customer. And the rest is history.

…One man passed out the moment I burst through this brothel’s window. Just imagine what would’ve happened to some poor guy who saw the horde of Amazons come bursting through the windows. Then there was the chase through the hallways. Her customer never made it…

It had to be my fault. I grimace and look away.

"…It may be too late for proper introductions, but I am Haruhime. How should I address you…?"

"Oh, yes…I'm Bell Cranell."

I finally get my embarrassment in check and tell the girl, Haruhime, my name.

"Well then, Master Cranell…If you are not my appointed customer, then why are you here?"

An inquisitive look takes over her face as she speaks in a soft voice.

Her being in this brothel means that Haruhime is more than likely a member of *Ishtar Familia*. If I told her that her allies chased me all the way here…What choice do I have? I decide to let every cat out of the bag.

Surely she's figured out I'm the intruder by now. But she hasn't called anyone and is patiently waiting for my response.

Above all else, I've got a strange feeling that I can talk to this person…She has an aura of innocence that's completely unlike anyone else in the Pleasure Quarter. I tell her everything that happened in the past few hours, why I became a fugitive deep in hostile territory.

"You have experienced…a rather turbulent evening."

Her demeanor didn't change even after I finished talking. In fact, she looks sympathetic.

Do Amazonian manhunts happen that often…?

"The Amazons pursuing you…Was one among them named Aisha, by chance?"

"Do you know her?"

"I do. Lady Aisha has been very kind to me."

Her voice sounds a little apologetic, but there's a very honest smile on her lips.

So it's true, then—that Berbera Amazon has a softer side.

A bit hard to believe, after being chased around town and serving as her mobile kicking bag.

"I have a proposal. Once our time together has come to an end, I shall guide you to the safest escape route. It's highly unlikely you shall be discovered if you remain hidden in this room until early morning."

"Eh…A-are you sure?"

"I am. It may be for only one night…but I, Haruhime, would like to lend my assistance to you, Master Cranell."

It's hard to believe her; this could be a trap. But there's something in her smile, something genuine.

My cheeks start burning again. That smile, those eyes, the innocent air about her…She's amazing.

"Shameful as it is…I do have a request for you."

"Eh?"

"May we…engage in conversation until the appointed time comes?"

She looks away, her cheeks turning a rosy pink. She must've worked up a lot of courage to ask.

She must not get many visitors who aren't customers.

She's smiling at me like the main character's love interest in a fairy tale. I force a smile and nod. How could I refuse?

"Thank you so much!" She smiles from ear to ear and bows down to the floor again, except this time her fox tail is happily wagging back and forth.

She slides one of the *shouji* paper walls to the side and blue moonlight fills the room. Then she grabs four pillows for the both of us. We get comfortable and start talking.

"Where do you hail from, Master Cranell?"

"I'm from north of Orario, in a small valley behind the mountains…"

Still not sure how I feel about this "Master Cranell" thing, but I let it slide and answer the question.

Haruhime asks me about every little detail of my hometown. North of Orario, a village so small that most maps don't even bother printing its name…Her expression changes with every answer, hanging on to every word.

Are there many humans there? What kind of view did you have of the mountains? And so many other questions I've never even thought about before.

She's so happy listening. It's like talking to a really interested child who's never ventured beyond her own house.

She runs her fingers through her golden hair, clearly enthralled by my answers. Something tells me she was extremely sheltered when she was a little girl.

But why would someone like her be here…?

At the same time, I can't figure out how someone this pure ended up in the Pleasure Quarter.

She couldn't be more different from Aisha and the others. The air about her and the overwhelming aura of this Night District are polar opposites. I'm a fugitive, running away from her friends inside the territory of her familia, but here she is, talking to me like we're at a café or something. Haruhime clearly doesn't belong here.

"So then, you came to Orario to follow your dream of becoming an adventurer?"

"You could say that. I'd always wanted to, and I didn't have any money at the time…"

But I can't just outright ask her.

I hold my tongue and instead wait for her to ask the questions.

Haruhime blinks a few times and blushes again before falling silent. Maybe she realized that she'd been leading the conversation the entire time.

I can't help but giggle at her. She's a little older than me, so to see her get embarrassed over something so minor seems strange.

"Okay, well then…Where are *you* from, Miss Haruhime?"

The silence was too awkward. I break it by asking her the same question she asked me.

She sits back up again, her shame disappearing, and looks at the ceiling as if deep in thought.

"My birthplace…is in the Far East."

I already knew that most renarts are from there. Judging by her name, I kind of had that impression already.

She starts to paint pictures with words, images flowing out of her memory like leaves carried downstream by a river.

"It was a mountainous island country, completely surrounded by a beautiful blue ocean. The four seasons were much more pronounced than the ones here in Orario. Beautiful pink *sakura* trees covered the land in spring. The songs of *semi* beetles regaled us in summer. The mountains became brilliant shades of crimson during the frosty days of autumn…and everything was covered by thick blankets of snow in winter."

Nostalgia is absolutely oozing out her eyes. Her descriptions are even making me feel homesick.

Haruhime's gaze shifts from the ceiling to the moon, just visible between the *shouji*.

Bathed in moonlight, she looks more like an artist's painting than an actual person. Looking at her face in profile, I decide to ask her about her family.

"Miss Haruhime, were your parents high-ranking people? Aristocrats, maybe?"

"How did you ever guess?!"

She nearly jumps off the futon in surprise.

"Just kind of got that feeling..." I mumble as I scratch the back of my head. Then she starts to explain.

"It's just as you say, Mr. Cranell. I'm descended from a long line of nobles going back many generations. My mother was never present, and my father worked long hours for the government...I was raised by many servants from infancy."

Years of being trained to be an aristocrat, with no knowledge of the outside world...Raised with a silver spoon in her mouth, she was very lonely in her spacious cage, with very few friends.

Haruhime's face suddenly becomes clouded.

"Those days came to an abrupt end five years ago...I was disowned when I was eleven."

"What?!"

That completely blindsided me. I have to stop myself from falling over.

Disowned...Her parents cut off ties with her?

"W-why...?"

"In a state of grogginess...I ate an extremely valuable divine offering that was carried by one of my father's guests."

She goes on to explain that another aristocrat, a prum, was staying at their manor when she was eleven years old.

The aristocrat had been traveling to present an offering of purified rice cakes to their deity Amaterasu—and Haruhime ate all of them while sleepwalking.

...What's up with that? A bead of sweat rolls down my back.

"Did you, um, really eat them?"

"I have no memory. However, there were crumbs around my mouth when I returned to consciousness...I must've gotten hungry in the dead of night and my body acted on its own...!"

Haruhime hides her face with both hands, tears starting to pour out of her eyes.

Continuing her story, she says that her father was furious with her after that and demanded severe punishment—but the prum stepped in and said, "Well, there's nothing we can do about it now." The visiting aristocrat saved Haruhime's life that day. Being nobles, their families had a great deal of pride and had no choice but to protect it. So Haruhime was given to this aristocrat in exchange for saving her life.

The decision was made in a matter of moments. The prum left their manor almost immediately with Haruhime in tow.

…I don't want to doubt her story, but that prum sounds extremely suspicious.

I ask her about it, and she says that he treated her very well. Well enough that she became attached to him.

I'm getting an image of a pompous short man wrapping his arm around the shoulder of the weeping girl.

I want to point this out to her, but one look at her crying face and I just can't do it.

"S-so what happened next?"

"Sniff…Yes. I was in the back of a carriage, no idea where we were…when suddenly a deafening roar came from outside. The carriage was attacked by monsters…!"

Now she's got me on the edge of my seat.

"He ran away from the horde of ogres, abandoning me in my state of panic…"

"…Eh?"

"…A band of marauders rescued me at the last moment. Once they discovered my virginity, they decided *to sell me*, here, to Orario."

"—"

I'm stunned.

The full impact of what she says doesn't hit me at first, but no words will form in my mouth.

She was *sold*…to *Orario*…?!

"What do you mean by 'sold to Orario'…?"

"In layman's terms…a homeless, friendless girl like me is brought to the Pleasure Quarter to be sold as merchandise."

I watch her lips form those words in the moonlight, each of the dots connecting in the way that I had been praying they wouldn't.

The marauders protected her from the monsters but then treated her like everything else they stole from the carriage. She was still very young, so they didn't touch her. But they knew that she, her unsoiled body, would be worth a lot of money to the right people one day. And so they brought her to Orario.

"For a city with as many adventurers as Orario, locations such as the Pleasure Quarter are irreplaceable necessities to keep the peace."

Apparently, strong adventurers have similarly strong urges…

Those venturing out with their lives always on the line deal with enormous amounts of stress. Constantly spending time in the Dungeon, battling against death itself takes its toll. The need to vent stress and frustration can take violent forms, but it can also be relieved legally and peacefully in places like this.

That's why the Guild turns a blind eye to this place. Its existence reduces the amount of bar fights and property damage caused by adventurers. The Pleasure Quarter is a necessary evil.

Sure, her explanation makes sense. But the thought that the Guild is looking away from the truth—that human beings are being bought and sold—is absolutely horrible. I try to avoid making eye contact with Haruhime, but it's no use.

My eyes follow her long golden locks to the gorgeous green orbs in the center of her face.

Renarts are a special race within animal people because they are the only ones who are natural-born magic users.

When it comes to magic, most people think of elves right away. However, a renart's magic is a bit different. Each of their spells is quite unique. I've heard that they're referred to as sorcerers in the Far East.

Therefore, her "saviors" saw her value—in terms of potential strength and economic gain—when they brought her here to the center of the world, Orario, and sold her into this business.

She would have been brought here ostensibly under the guise of wanting to come on her own, but really she came through the gates as merchandise.

This is terrible…

Then she was sold off to the highest bidder. It just so happened that Lady Ishtar was in the area and took notice. The goddess purchased Haruhime to make her part of the familia…

Unable to follow her dreams, she experienced one tragedy after another.

She had no choice but to come to Orario. And now…?

I thought that all the working women here were like Aisha. But how many of them have stories similar to Haruhime's?

It's the truth I wish I'd never known.

And I realize something at the same time.

I was completely clueless. But now, after listening to Haruhime, I can never go back.

"Umm…I had always wanted to come to the continent, being from an island nation. So my wish was fulfilled…from a certain point of view."

She must've seen the gears turning in my head and desperately tries to console me.

But now all I see is pain in that beautiful smile. "It may not be the best of circumstances, but my newfound sisters take very good care of me." Another attempt to convince me she's okay.

My lips refuse to open. I can barely even look at her.

What the hell am I supposed to say? I'm an adventurer; I'm part of the reason she's in this mess.

I want to say, "Let's run away together, right now," but I'm a fugitive deep within *Ishtar Familia*'s territory. The Amazons are still after me. I'm in no position to help her.

But Haruhime's eyes haven't changed at all. Another awkward silence falls, and this time she's the one to speak up.

"There's also the fact that…many stories of this city have reached the Far East. Orario has always been appealing to me."

Her eyes soften. That must have triggered my voice to wake up, because it bursts out of my mouth:

"Are you talking about *Dungeon Oratoria*?"

"The same!"

That's a collection of Dungeon stories I received from my grandfather when I was a child. It was my bible growing up, *Dungeon Oratoria*.

It documents in great detail the journeys and deeds of many heroes in Orario. I've heard there aren't many copies of the original book, but I guess the stories have spread around the world.

Haruhime nods energetically in my direction.

"*Dungeon Oratoria* is fascinating…But the story I remember most was about a group of valiant knights from different countries joining forces in search of the Holy Grail."

"Isn't that 'The Adventures of Garland'? Where the queen was sick and only water purified by the Grail could cure her?"

"You know of it? Then what about the story of a spirit trapped in a lamp and the young mage—?"

"If I remember right…'The Wizard Aladdin'?"

"Yes!"

That's the first time she's sounded excited.

Her eyes sparkle every time I correctly guess the title of the story she describes.

"Don't tell me—you like legends and fairy tales?"

"I absolutely adore them! They were the only way I could learn of the outside world when I still lived in the manor…!"

A common interest. She's so happy she's found another person with this kind of childish hobby that—*FLICK!* Haruhime's ears perk right up.

The stories come flowing out of her, and I'm right there, sharing ideas along the way.

"Durandal the Lost." "Our Song of Enou." "The Legend of Saint Giorgio."……More and more. She knows quite a few unusual stories. Wait a second, I have no room to judge.

I doubt that any of the other prostitutes here know about any of these. This might be the first time she's been able to talk about it in years.

Not to mention that most people "outgrow" fairy tales at a certain age.

I still don't know how to talk about the Pleasure Quarter with her. I'm so lucky that Haruhime brought this up. Now we can both honestly smile and laugh with each other.

Some part of me realizes I'm only hiding from the truth, but it's not every day I can completely escape into a beautiful world with a companion like her.

"I truly admire the knight who sang of love to his queen, despite both of them knowing their dreams could never come true!"

"I think that the jousting scenes from 'Sir Laslow' are much more impressive…"

"Master Cranell, are you familiar with the story of Snow White?"

"I don't know much other than the heroes' stories…"

She leans closer to me and I readjust on my pillow.

I can hold my ground when it comes to heroic tales, but Haruhime knows so much more than I do, it's almost intimidating.

For the first time in a while, she falls silent. Her thick tail is swishing back and forth a bit slower now.

"So then, Haruhime, what's your favorite kind of story?"

"It's hard to choose…but the one that has left a lasting impression on me was about a princess who was saved from a demon by a young, nameless warrior…It is one of the oldest stories in the Far East.”

That would mean that she likes stories where the hero saves a damsel in distress…The moment where a strong hand reaches out to rescue a princess from danger.

It could be because she’s been cooped up in a box most of her life. Hang on, my cheeks are blushing.

That look on her face, it’s like she’s just revealed the location of an irreplaceable treasure…She closes her eyes.

“There was a time when I, too, wanted my own hero to take me somewhere far away, just like in the pages of the book…”

I was about to say something, but the soft smile in her eyes makes me stop.

Was she talking about back in the Far East, where she never set foot outside her family’s manor?

Or sometime much more recent?

“…But that was the foolish dream of the girl lost in fairy tales. No hero would ever come for someone as lowly as myself.”

“Of—of course he would!”

Startled by the resignation in her voice, I rise to my knees and try to deny her claim.

“No hero would leave behind someone like you! Don’t give up hope!

“Some pitiful, naive guy like me might not be able to do anything meaningful.

“But the heroes I look up to, the ones Gramps told me about, would never do such a thing.

“If any one of those brave souls were here, he would rescue you from this place on sight.”

I deliver an impassioned speech. She just watches me with those beautiful green eyes…and smiles.

“I am quite sure that the heroes you speak of had the same kindhearted soul as you do, Master Cranell…However, I am neither a beautiful queen nor a fair maiden in imminent danger.”

She slowly blinks and says:

“I am a prostitute.”

“!!”

My eyes fly open. Her words were soft and gentle, but they sliced through my heart with the sting of a thousand knives.

“While still inexperienced, I have given my body to many men.”

“

The black collar around her neck flashes in the moonlight, looking more and more like a shackle every moment.

"…It appears the time has come."

Feeling pathetic and absolutely useless, I watch Haruhime turn to the window and gaze outside once more.

I take a look as well. The red-light district has almost come to a standstill. More than half the magic-stone lamps are off and all the lanterns are snuffed out. The ruckus from before feels like a distant memory.

Haruhime gracefully rises to her feet.

"I very much enjoyed our time together this evening…Thank you."

She's thanking me? Why is she thanking me? What do I say?

She takes something out of a closet in the back corner—a thick, hooded cloak—and hands it to me. I absentmindedly take it from her outstretched hands and obediently follow her out of the room after putting it over my head. She leads me out of the brothel so quickly I don't realize we're outside until the cool air hits my face.

There isn't a soul in this back alley. We leave the red-light district with the same obscurity as childhood memories disappearing from an adult mind.

Haruhime is guiding me with a smaller paper lantern hanging on the end of a stick.

"This passage is connected to Daedalus Street. If you avoid the main passageway, it is highly unlikely your presence will be discovered by Aisha or the other Amazons."

She stops and turns to face me. Many soft lights illuminate the complex twists and turns that make up Daedalus Street.

Over two months ago now, during Monsterphilia, the goddess and I got lost in there trying to escape from a monster. To think the Pleasure Quarter's red-light district is directly linked to that place…

"Can you read the Ariadne signposts?"

"Y-yes…"

"Follow them closely, and you will cut through the maze in very little time."

Then she hands me the lantern.

I tilt my head, a little confused. "Quickly now, hurry." She sends me through the archway.

I walk in a little ways before realizing she didn't come with me. I stop and look over my shoulder.

There she is, still standing in that same spot. She smiles before giving me a deep bow.

That archway feels like a gate between two different worlds, and she can't take a step into this one.

"…"

I feel her gaze on my back as I make my way out of the Pleasure Quarter, alone.

* * *

The moon was visible from the highest floor of the palace.

Beautiful tapestries decorated the walls and a rug resembling a large wheel added color and texture to the floor. A table stood in the middle of the room, with two covered sofas on either side. Even though this area functioned as a meeting room, a wide bed equipped with a canopy took up most of one corner. A profound musk hung in the air.

The magic-stone lamps mounted on the ceiling lit up the figure of a goddess sitting on the sofa facing the doorway. A thin pyre of purple smoke rose from the long pipe in her right hand.

"Hey, Ishtar. I'm here."

CLACK! The door opened to reveal a handsome god with a dandy smile: Hermes.

Led to the room by the goddess's assistant, Hermes gave a quick wave. The goddess—Ishtar—curled her lips upward the moment she saw his face.

"You've kept me waiting."

"There was quite the show going on outside. Got a bit caught up in watching, completely forgot the time. Sorry 'bout that."

Hermes's shoulders drooped down as he apologized and cautiously took a few steps into the room.

With that, Ishtar let the transgression slide without losing her grin.

The evening guest took a seat on the closest sofa and set down a small pouch on the table. Ishtar's assistant kept a close eye on it from his post just inside the doorway.

A secret meeting between deities had begun in one of Ishtar's many private quarters.

"Any chance you're in the mood to enjoy more small talk?"

"I told you, you've kept me waiting. Get to it."

"Scaaary…Anyway—as requested, your parcel has arrived."

Hermes reached into the pouch and took out a small wooden box covered in black lacquer.

Ishtar's grin grew even wider, satisfaction written all over her face.

"Just to be clear, news of our meeting doesn't leave this room."

"But of course. That's my duty to my client. I won't damage my own name."

Hermes had been contracted by Ishtar to do a "delivery" for her.

This particular item had traveled a great distance, passing through many cities before finally arriving in Orario. *Hermes Familia* was known for their "light footwork" and efficiency as couriers. They were often contracted to do jobs like this.

The fact that Hermes delivered this particular package himself spoke volumes as to the level of secrecy Ishtar required for the job.

Since the presence of guards would stick out like a sore thumb, Hermes mingled with the customers of the Pleasure Quarter to elude prying eyes by hiding in plain sight.

"But I can't say I feel too good about it."

Hermes leaned back onto the sofa and jerked his thumb in the direction of the box.

Ishtar's assistant shuffled his way around the room until he stood directly behind his goddess, eyes locked on the dandy deity as he moved.

"That's a Killing Stone, isn't it?"

The content of the box was revealed by the god himself.

The human man's eyes narrowed. Ishtar's lip twitched before she took in a deep breath of smoke from her pipe.

"So you saw it. So much for keeping your good name as a delivery boy, Hermes."

"Wasn't on purpose."

The deity avoided her sharp gaze and responded as if discussing the day's news over dinner.

Suddenly, his long, thin eyes opened into a more serious expression.

"You got something in the works?"

Ishtar laughed defiantly from her seat on the other sofa.

"I'll show you something very interesting before too long."

A fire burned brightly from inside her amethyst eyes.

"A stuck-up bitch calling herself queen being knocked off her pedestal."

Hermes's shoulders quivered as Ishtar had visions of a certain Goddess of Beauty falling into the flames.

A woman's jealousy was truly frightening.

"Hermes, do you have any information that would brighten my day? A weakness that…*woman* has, perhaps?"

Ishtar's feelings of hostility toward the goddess Freya had become a raging inferno. So she asked Hermes to provide her with a direction for the flames to spread.

Her desire to see the one everyone called the "most beautiful" fall into the deepest pits of despair was now an obsession.

She could see it now, Freya's pitiful face, Ishtar laughing at her from the top of her new throne.

Hermes was always in the know and might have the information that would allow her to make these visions a reality.

"Well, I'm a terrible liar when talking to a Goddess of Beauty; can't seem to focus. Couldn't help it if a few things slip once in a while."

Hermes's eyes caressed the goddess's fully exposed body line, spending a great deal of time outlining the curves of her breasts. His cheeks turned red before he hid his eyes beneath the brim of his feathered hat.

Seeing the god like this returned the smile to her lips, her eyes flaring.

Hermes looked up, his eyes thin again with a hint of sparkle—like he was trying to make a joke while being as vague as possible. However, what he saw was the goddess rising from her sofa and removing her coverings.

"…What are you…?"

The crown, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, and finally the piece of cloth holding her breasts in place all hit the floor at her feet.

Hermes's eyes shrank to the size of pinpoints as a dark shadow fell over him. The full power of the Goddess of Beauty's tanned body had been brought to bear.

"Rejoice. I'll squeeze every bit of useful information out of you—for free."

Hermes sat there, absolutely petrified. His joking demeanor from just a moment ago was nowhere to be found.

She leaned down over him, puckering her luscious lips right in front of his face.

“H-hold it, Ishtar, I-I didn’t mean…!”

The dark shadow completely enveloped Hermes as the human assistant quietly went about his business, picking up Ishtar’s discarded accessories.

“AaaaAAAHHahHHAaaaaaa!” echoed throughout the room.

“Unn…Ahhh…”

A shirtless, powerless Hermes lay sprawled out on top of the canopied bed. Tiny tears fell from the corners of his eyes.

Ishtar was back on the sofa, still naked and smoking her pipe. She exhaled a long stream of smoke, enjoying the flavor.

“The most recent child to catch Freya’s attention, yes…”

The sweat covering her body glistened in the soft light as she dramatically crossed her legs. Her seductive aura at its peak, she smiled and whispered under her breath.

“Bell Cranell…”

In the end, Hermes had indeed given her a way to inflict pain on her sworn enemy. He tried to hold out, but her allure had overwhelmed him into submission.

She had more than just Bell’s name. Hermes had revealed enough details for her to realize she had seen the boy that night. She took another hit from the pipe, images of their brief encounter filling her mind.

“Head over heels for a pip-squeak like that…What poor taste.”

More purple smoke drifted from her mouth as a smirk overtook her face.

Then, a sudden shift—to the ravenous grin of a beast.

“Fine, then. I’ll make that kid *mine*.”

CHAPTER 3 AGONY OF THE FOX AND THE RABBIT

© Suzuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 3

AGONY OF THE FOX AND THE RABBIT

"So? Let's hear it."

I had been told to take a seat.

The goddess towers over me, arms crossed in front of her chest.

I finally made it back to *Hestia Familia*'s home, Hearthstone Manor. Everyone has gathered in the living room.

Quite a bit happened after I left the Pleasure Quarter. As a result, I didn't get back here until early morning.

I tried to sneak in as quietly as I could, but it was no use. The goddess captured me right away and thus started the interrogation.

"Spent the night in the Pleasure Quarter, did you~~? So now, Bell, what do you have to say for yourself, huh~~?"

She figured out that I'd spent the night at a brothel before I could deny it.

With that sweet musky smell all over my body, I'm sure it was obvious. She's looking at me like I'm the scum of the earth. Tears won't stop leaking out of my eyes.

She worked late into the night last night; no one was here when she came home. Then once Welf and the others got back, someone was missing. She feared the worst for hours and hours, and then I showed up smelling like this. Of course she's angry with me. I can't blame her twin black ponytails for flexing toward the ceiling.

What's worse is that Lilly's standing right next to the goddess, with an equally scary look on her face.

Welf sighs a little ways away. Mikoto is so anxious I can feel it from here.

"L-L-Lady Hestia, I am at fault for everything that transpired. Please be merciful with Sir Bell…!"

"Mikoto, be quiet."

The goddess shut down Mikoto's attempt to protect me without even looking at her.

Lilly knows the full story of what happened in the Pleasure Quarter, and she's fuming—which means all of them think I was doing *that* late into the night just because I smell like the working ladies.

"So thennn…you slept with one of the prostitutes, did you~~?"

"N-no!"

I vigorously shake my head left and right, desperately trying to convince my goddess that I'm innocent, and try to ignore her terrifying tone. I've never heard anything like it.

"I-I didn't sleep with anyone, nor do I want to! This is all a big misunderstanding!"

"So, if that's the case, whyyyyy was Mr. Bell out all night?"

Now Lilly's using it, too?! They both have the wrong idea! How am I supposed to convince them?!

I can't exactly tell every detail of what happened in the Pleasure Quarter. Same thing goes for the fact that I got lost on Daedalus Street on the way home after Haruhime led me out of the red-light district.

The only option left is to earnestly deny everything at once.

"Wh-what I'm trying to say is, I didn't do anything like that with anyone!"

"Is that sooo?"

The goddess narrows her eyes at me. Lilly must be on the same mental wavelength because she chooses that moment to hold up a small bottle.

"Then you mind explaining this?"

The goddess takes the bottle from Lilly and thrusts it in front of my face. It's a clear glass bottle about the size of a chess piece, filled with red liquid—an aphrodisiac.

Lord Hermessssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!

My soul screams in anguish.

That damn bottle has gotten me into so much trouble since last night. I can still see that dandy smile of his in the back of my mind. But now it feels more like a plague than anything else.

I want to tell Lady Hestia everything about how that bottle came into my possession.

However, *"I'd like you to keep the fact I was here a secret between us. Agreed?"* I can still hear his voice in my head.

I don't have the courage to break a direct promise with a god.

No matter what anyone says, the gods need to be respected and their orders obeyed.

I'm trapped between the promise and Lady Hestia's icy death stare. *CRICK!* My head slumps like a puppet whose strings have just been cut.

"…How should we proceed, Lady Hestia?"

Lilly looks away from the pitiful pile of human flesh I've become and turns to face the goddess.

"…No one can lie to a god. Bell is telling the truth."

Lady Hestia pauses for a few excruciatingly long moments before saying that and letting out a long, deep sigh.

Relief rushes through me. I look up at her, my face filled with joy for the fact that my pleas had reached her. However, those angry eyes reappear almost immediately.

"However, I cannot forgive you for spending the night in the Pleasure Quarter! I can't forgive the fact you've even shown interest in that wretched place!"

Fixing my posture, I want nothing more than to quell the anger pouring out of her, convince her it's all a big mistake.

But those icy, sharp eyes won't let me speak. The words evaporate from my mind as I hunch back toward the floor.

"You will spend the day serving a punishment as I see fit. That will give you enough time to think about what you've done. Well?"

"Yes…"

That's the only word that can slip through my dry throat.

I caused a major incident in the Pleasure Quarter, the territory of another familia. I made us look bad. I'm the leader; this familia's reputation is based on my actions. The goddess's hands are tied—it would look bad in front of the other members if she didn't punish me.

Her role as head of the familia complete, she turns and exits the living room, leaving behind the pulsing aura of anger in her wake. Lilly follows suit.

"My most sincere apologies, Sir Bell…"

It's finally over. I've been sitting in this position so long that my legs are completely numb. I try to move, but the pins and needles force me back to the floor. More blood fills my legs as Mikoto walks over to me.

I tell her not to worry, that it was all my fault because I was the one who followed her. "You don't have to apologize," I say, forcing a smile.

“You really okay? You had us worried.”

Welf walks over to me with a grimace on his face.

After we were separated last night, they apparently heard that a group of Lady Ishtar’s Amazons was chasing a rabbit. In fact, they almost got caught up in it after my pursuers lost sight of me at one point. They had no way of knowing and retreated before the Amazons saw them.

I made everyone worry…I can’t express how sorry I am about that.

“Don’t think I have to tell you, but listen to Lady Hestia. Don’t go back.”

“…”

“You saw something you wish you hadn’t, right?”

I break eye contact with Welf and look at the floor.

That’s right—Haruhime……

“…Oh yeah, Mikoto, why did you and Chigusa go to the Pleasure Quarter in the first place?”

Desperate to change the subject, I turn to face Mikoto and ask her.

She explains everything to me.

“We heard there was a prostitute residing in the Pleasure Quarter who resembled someone from my homeland…We went there to look for her.”

The moment she says this person had been missing for years, my eyes shoot open.

No way…The dots start connecting in my head.

Both Haruhime and Mikoto are from the Far East.

“Hey, Be-ell!! I haven’t got all day!”

My train of thought is derailed by the goddess’s angry voice calling me from outside the living room.

I force myself up toward her voice. This must be how little kids feel when parents pull them away from something interesting.

◆

My punishment turned out to be community service.

Basically, I go around the area, greeting everyone I meet and helping anyone who needs it.

I say my name and familia, then assist with any odd jobs waiting to be done or try to solve their problems.

"Sorry for the trouble, Little Rookie! Couldn't have done it without you!"

"My pleasure!"

Sweeping the backstreets, replacing magic stones in the lamps, carrying boxes…A friendly middle-age man thanked me for everything as I set off to find more people.

It's important for familias—which are composed of people from different countries and cities—to present a friendly image to our neighbors. And at the very least, they get to know our faces and think of our goddess in a good light. Being accepted into the community is the first step to adjusting to our new home.

We've had our hands full just living our lives until recently… But Hestia's own words, "Love thy Gekai neighbor," describe her extremely well.

This punishment is probably her way of getting all that off to a good start.

"It's the Li'l Looky!"

"Oh wow, he is!"

I make my way down a street with my arms full of plywood when a little boy and a little girl point at me.

Who would have thought the War Game would have this much impact? Two kids remembered my title! Their eyes are sparkling with wonder and admiration.

This is awesome…! How should I respond, though?

I've been working really hard all morning. My limbs are tired and covered in sweat, but I do my best to wave back at them.

"He's all shaky."

"So weak!"

I never knew innocent words could be so merciless. The smile dissolves from my lips.

I'm not out fulfilling a quest right now. My Level 3 Strength is being used on errands and repair jobs for free. Those kids may be right…

I greet person after person, do job after job, and wind up on West Main Street before I know it.

"Whitey, do your best for us, meow!"

"Sorry about this, Mr. Adventurer!"

The cat person Ahnya grabs my attention as I pass in front of

The Benevolent Mistress. She asks for my help to repair the leaky roof of a nearby building.

Ahnya and one of her human coworkers, Runoa, call out to me as I ascend a ladder to the problem area.

At this rate, should I just start my own business…?

“This is saving us a whole lot of time, Mr. Adventurer!”

“Once you’re done with that, meow, I’ll give you my panties as a thank-you, meow!”

“Keep them!”

Another cat person, Chloe, appears next to Runoa. My face turns beet red as I yell back to her.

The three of them look up at me from the street level. A fourth person, the elf Lyu, walks up behind them and slaps them all across the backs of the heads with one swift motion. “““UGGHA!””” All of them wince in unison.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, I set to work. The first thing I have to do is pry up the rotting wood with the back of a hammer and then slide in fresh plywood before nailing it all into place.

Haven’t done anything like this since I lived with Gramps! These skills are finally coming in handy. I admire my work for a moment before descending the ladder. Lyu and Syr, another waitress at The Benevolent Mistress, are there waiting for me.

“Thank you for your hard work, Mr. Cranell. I apologize on behalf of my colleagues.”

“Taking time away from your busy schedule to fix our roof… Sorry, Bell.”

“Ah, it was nothing.”

I give a light bow. They’ve helped me out so much in the past, I really can’t complain.

Lyu’s sky-blue eyes slowly blink as she returns the gesture. Syr’s blue-gray hair swishes when she smiles back at me.

“You’ve become quite the household name, Bell.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes. Adventurers, regular customers—everyone’s talking about you.”

Syr tells me that I’m becoming very popular.

In fact, there hasn’t been a day since the War Game that my name hasn’t come up at some point at their bar.

A few people recognized me after I ranked up to Level 2, but nothing like this…Those kids from before…now I find out people are talking about me over beers? It almost doesn't feel real.

I scratch my chin and look away from her. She's giggling at me, too.

"Mr. Cranell, please have lunch at our café."

"Are…are you sure?"

Lyu waited for a break in our conversation to invite me to The Benevolent Mistress. This is too good to be true.

"Yes. You repaired our roof, so I'm sure that Mama Mia will allow—"

Lyu suddenly stops speaking.

She's standing about an arm's length away from me, but she takes a step back and tilts her head to the side.

"I know this, but where…?" Her eyes narrow as those words quietly roll off her tongue. Syr must've noticed something was strange, too, and takes another step closer.

She leans in real close. I can feel my cheeks burning again. Her nose flares open as she takes a big whiff of my shirt.

"This smell…"

With those words, my face instantly goes from burning hot to ice-cold.

A smell on my body—a shower, fresh clothes, and a morning of hard work didn't get rid of the musk from last night?!

"S-sorry, forget about lunch! We—we have something else to attend to!"

Their backs were already turned before they started speaking. The two girls make leaping steps past the other waitresses.

I turn to leave, but I can feel Chloe's sad eyes boring into me. It's time for a quick exit.

"…Haaa~."

I could've had a nice lunch, but instead I run away rather than try to clear my name. Pitiful, absolutely pitiful.

I join the flow of demi-humans traveling down West Main Street underneath the clear blue sky.

I didn't think I'd have to skip lunch as part of my punishment… but I'd forgotten all about the Pleasure Quarter while doing my volunteer work. Haruhime was finally out of my head, but everything came flooding back when the girls noticed that smell. Now I'm just depressed.

There hasn't been a chance to get any of this off my chest, and now the weight is back. If only I had someone to talk to.

I keep putting one foot in front of the other, afraid that I'll drown in this whirlpool of dark emotion if I stop moving.

Absentmindedly drifting down West Main—Adventurers Way—my ears only vaguely notice the noon bells in the distance. The flow of traffic guides me into Guild Headquarters.

"Oh, Bell."

Eina sees me from her spot behind the reception counter the moment I walk to the main doors of the mostly empty Pantheon.

She'll listen to me. She's always had advice for me and never let me down. I've gotten this far because of her.

But what can she do? I ask myself as I drift forward. The Guild knows what's going on in that district…It'd probably just cause more problems when all is said and done.

Is this really a good idea? My feet come to a stop in the middle of the lobby. Eina's still looking at me from behind the counter.

She stands up, says a few words to some coworkers, and walks out to greet me.

Coming right up to me, she doesn't wait for any "hellos" and says:

"Shall we go to a consultation box?"

Right away.

"Ummm…"

I stutter, but she just smiles back at me.

"You've got something on your mind, something important? I can tell."

She says it's written all over my face.

Her soft emerald-green gaze meets mine through her glasses.

"I've said it before and I'll say it again: Come to me for advice on anything. I'm your adviser, it's my job."

A sudden candlelight flickers within me.

That's when I know I should talk with her. Eina has always been kind; she'll guide me through this.

She's offering me help before I've even explained what's going on. I'd have to be an idiot to refuse.

There she is, smiling and waiting patiently for my response. I give her a big nod.

I'll trust her!

"A brothellll?"

The smile from a moment ago has disappeared, replaced by a stare of contempt.

*I knew it…*I admit to myself, crying on the inside.

We're inside the consultation box. This place is soundproof so that adventurers and their advisers can discuss matters without worrying about being overheard. So with that in mind, I started talking about what happened in the Pleasure Quarter…The moment the word *brothel* came up, Eina's demeanor went cold real quick.

Her perfectly trimmed, thin eyebrows stand on end as anger blasts from her eyes.

The lenses of her glasses flare from the other side of the desk between us before she stands up. *SLIDE.* Her chair slips backward across the marble floor.

"So you're saying that you spent the night with one of those women?!"

"N-n-n-n-n-no! Not at all!"

She accuses me with veins pulsing in her red face.

I don't know if it's because she's a half-elf, but she's looking at me like I'm some pile of garbage. A particularly revolting pile of garbage she's angry with for some reason.

Coming back to herself, Eina shakes her head back and forth and looks off to the side.

"W-well, you are an adventurer and a man, after all…It's only natural that you'd be curious about that kind of thing at your age… But…but, to actually…"

The tips of her short elfish ears turn bright pink. Struggling to find the right words, she practically spits them out.

"But to actually go~~?!"

She yells at me with both her eyes clenched shut.

"I forbid you to go to another brothel, ever! Understood?!"

"Eh, ah, but—"

"EV-ER!!"

"Y-YES, MISS EINA!"

She threateningly leans over the table. With nowhere to run, I desperately nod my head up and down, completely overwhelmed.

Backing off, Eina sits back down in her chair. She's always felt like an older sister to me, mature and knowledgeable. But right now she's pouting like a little girl.

Great, now someone else is mad at me. She still won't look at me, arms crossed and ears beet red.

I really shouldn't be asking women for advice on this sort of thing. Too late now, though.

An awkward silence continues for far too long…I feel so tiny in this chair. At long last, I work up the courage to ask her a question.

"Um, is there anything you can tell me about *Ishtar Familia*…?"

She thinks that my head's full of visions of fun nights with prostitutes. But at long last, she looks at me from behind the side of her glasses. The anger's still there.

Members of that familia spent most of last night chasing me through town. Whether I like it or not, I have a history with them now and they might try to find me again. I should learn as much about them as I can. I try my best to convey what happened last night to Eina, and that I wasn't trying to scout for my next "adventure."

She watches me in silence for a few moments before letting out a light sigh.

"I'll be back in a moment."

She finally decides to believe me, and leaves to go get a file from her desk.

"*Ishtar Familia*…As you know, they're a highly influential Dungeon-prowling familia whose territory encompasses all of the Pleasure Quarter."

Eina brought back a small pile of folders and thumbs through them as she speaks.

I hang on to every word she says. There's no telling when I might need this information.

Most members of the familia are Amazons, and 90 percent of all members are female. Although they earn a great deal of money working in the Dungeon by day, 40 percent of their income is generated from the Pleasure Quarter in the third district of Orario.

"A group of Amazons within their ranks have become known as the Berbera. Most of them are at Level Three, the exception being their leader, 'Androctonus, the Man Slayer.'…Phryne Jamil is a top-class adventurer at Level Five."

Level 5—a cold chill runs down my spine. Memories of what I saw last night are going to give me nightmares.

Just as I thought, Phryne is one of the elites. With that much strength and speed, how could she not be?

And her given title, Androctonus……It's scary how much that makes sense.

"Uh…Is there any information on an Amazon named Aisha and a renart called Haruhime?"

"Actually, Aisha Belka is rather well known. While she is listed as Level Three, there are rumors that she's right on the cusp of Level Four. As far as Level Three is concerned, she's the cream of the crop."

Eina also tells me that Aisha's title is "Antianeira."

"As for this renart—Haruhime, was it? I've never heard of her. She's not on our list, either…Most likely, she's a noncombatant."

Eina runs her finger down the page in her file. I assume that's *Ishtar Familia*'s roster.

A noncombatant…a member of the familia who hasn't received a Blessing.

That makes a lot of sense. Leaving Aisha and others like her out, I get the feeling that most of *Ishtar Familia*'s members are in charge of the brothels…And Haruhime was sold to them, so they do their best to keep her true identity a secret. Her name appearing on that list would only cause trouble.

Eina asks me if I know anything and I immediately say no.

"Back to the topic of the *Ishtar Familia* itself, the Guild has assigned them an 'A' rank. They're one of the most powerful and influential groups in Orario."

"…"

"They're on the complete opposite side of the spectrum from *Hestia Familia*. Especially Phryne Jamil…She once fought head-to-head against the Kenki. Miss Wallenstein was nearly defeated."

"WHAT?!"

That little tidbit of information from Eina shakes me to my very core.

Miss Aiz—almost lost?

"You have to realize this was a few years ago. Ms. Jamil was at a higher level at the time…Ms. Wallenstein recently surpassed her by ranking up to Level Six."

Eina quickly tries to reassure me, but it's too late.

Phryne is already on a plane that my idol struggled to reach…

If that's true, then *Ishtar Familia* truly is among the best of the best. There's no denying that now.

Moments pass where I have no idea what to say.

"Is everything all right?"

"O-oh, yes…I'm fine."

Coming back to myself, Eina’s explanation takes a sudden turn.

“I don’t have all the details on what I’m about to share with you. I’ve never been in charge of any members of that familia, but…there have been rumors that *Ishtar Familia* doesn’t report accurate information to the Guild.”

“Like, hiding their real power?”

“Exactly. Several rival goddesses raised complaints against them, saying that their members fought with strength well beyond that of their reported levels.”

I suddenly remember something that Hestia told me—that *Hermes Familia* had done something similar to this, lying about their levels.

“They convinced us to take action. The Guild launched a full investigation into *Ishtar Familia*, specifically pertaining to the level of the Berbera, under the threat of severe punishment. Goddess Ishtar was forced to show us all their Statuses.”

“And……?”

“…Innocent. Not even a hint of foul play.”

The declaration blindsides me.

“Every one of them matched our records to the letter. That’s when she went on the offensive, claiming that she had been falsely accused…She demanded the Guild be penalized and pay her a heavy fine. We agreed to all her demands.”

“Th-they took money *from* the Guild…?!”

“Yes, and quite a large sum at that. All her followers’ Magic and Skills had been revealed to the Guild, so she had a great deal of leverage…Ever since that day, we haven’t been able to take any real action against *Ishtar Familia*.”

Powerful enough to take money away from the acting government of the city…? Sweat is pouring out of my skin now.

“We were forced to level penalties against the familias that brought up the charges as well. *Ishtar Familia* wiped them out in their weakened state. Their goddesses were sent back to Tenkai. All this happened around five years ago.”

“…”

“It’s hard to explain, having watched all this happen. Everything turned out like some kind of script, all the actors played their parts…It felt as though we were all attached to strings and Goddess Ishtar was the puppet master.”

Eina crosses her arms, deep in thought as she tells me what she can remember from those days.

Their members’ Strength and Speed far surpass their reported levels.

A secret that even a full investigation by the Guild couldn’t uncover.

What’s *Ishtar Familia* got to hide?

“Bell…personally, I’m afraid of *Ishtar Familia*. Even without the brothel you mentioned earlier, it would be best to avoid those women whenever possible.”

That’s a clear warning based not only on their strength as a familia but also the very real possibility that they’re doing something shady.

Then Eina tells me that I should do everything in my power to avoid what happened with *Apollo Familia*.

I sit in my chair in complete silence. Eina looks over at me like I’m about to fall over some kind of edge.

I still see that renart’s face every time I close my eyes, but I have to say something. Since I have no response for Eina, I ask her a question instead.

“…Eina, does the Guild know…about the Pleasure Quarter, what’s happening…?”

I have to know if what Haruhime said is true.

Eina knows immediately that I’m referring to their business practices and averts her eyes.

“…Yes. The Guild has taken a neutral stance. We know what is happening behind closed doors there as well—but I think it would be next to impossible for us to do anything about it at this point.”

Haruhime was right.

They’re ignoring the truth in order to keep the peace.

Eina looks legitimately sad, too. The truth weighs heavily on both of us.

◆

The city was filled with rays of afternoon sunshine.

While most adventurers were busy toiling away in the Dungeon underground, the citizens of Orario went about their business, finished their shopping, or tried their best to kill time.

Several gods and goddesses walked among them, finding ways to entertain themselves. One deity made a pass at an absolutely radiant elf. Meanwhile, a group of gods gulped down alcohol as they walked around, day drinking with abandon. Yet another one was playing with a group of children, kicking a ball back and forth. Deities were everywhere.

Orario's Western District was a bit livelier thanks to the community service of one adventurer. One god made his way through the busy streets, staying out of sight until he arrived at another bar.

"Little Ahnya, call Mia for me. It's urgent."

"Meow, Lord Hermes again, meow?"

Hermes called out to the first waitress he saw the moment he stepped through the doorway of The Benevolent Mistress.

The catgirl reluctantly disappeared into the back of the bar. An even more annoyed female dwarf appeared moments later.

"I'm begging you, Mia, send Lady Freya a message for me!"

"This again? Told you last time, you got legs, use 'em. I ain't doin' it."

"But this time she actually might kill me!"

Mia's rejection made Hermes become desperate.

The god was alone. Quickly weaving his way through the tables and all the way up to the kitchen window, Hermes came close enough to the irritated dwarf to keep their conversation from being overheard.

"You see…Bell—oh, Bell!"

"What's happened to the lad now? You do somethin' to 'im?"

"It's not my fault…I was powerless, helpless…I'm not the bad guy here…!"

"Out with it already…

"Before my fist goes through yer face," she added with a twitch of the lip. Hermes's already pale face went even bleaker under the incredible pressure of her sharp gaze. His mind scrambled to find the right words and shove them out of his mouth before she made good on her promise.

"Ishtar's got her sights set on Bell…He's in danger on so many levels!"

Mia's annoyance steadily became dumbfounded amazement as Hermes explained the events that unfolded the previous night at *Ishtar Familia*'s home.

He revealed, under intense questioning by Ishtar, that the goddess Freya was rather taken with the boy.

"Please, Mia, send a message in my place! If I had to explain all this to Lady Freya in person…"

He could already see the look on the Goddess of Beauty's face, a cold smile as she mouthed the words "Death, yes." Hermes trembled every time he closed his eyes, her locks of silver hair whipping through his mind.

That's when another person, a silver-haired human girl, appeared behind the terrified deity.

"How do you mean Bell is in danger, Lord Hermes?"

"UWAH?!" Hermes nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise.

He spun around and saw Syr smiling back at him.

"Earlier today, there was the faint but unmistakable smell of musk on Bell. You wouldn't have had anything to do with that—now would you, Lord Hermes? What's your answer?"

"N-n-now, Syr, my dear. Don't you know it's wrong for a mortal girl to scare a god?"

Her lips may have been smiling, but the accusation in her eyes exerted so much pressure that the tone of Hermes's voice went noticeably higher.

That got the attention of the other employees. It wasn't long before a small crowd gathered around the kitchen window.

"HYEHE!" More questions battered the usually charming deity. Mia massaged her temple and let out a long sigh.

◆

It's early evening. This sky is a beautiful shade of red as the sun sets in the west.

I did some more volunteer work after talking with Eina. But the goddess had insisted that I meet her in front of a store at this hour.

Lilly, Welf, Mikoto, and the goddess—still wearing her Jyaga Maru Kun street-stand apron—have gathered in front of an old door, and we go inside the rather shabby-looking bookshop.

"Hey, there! We're here to help, as promised!"

"Ah, Hestia. You really came."

Apparently, the goddess had made that promise a while ago.

She'd told each of us two or three times this morning to meet here, but none of us knew her plan until now.

"You're so famous now, you threw these old bones for a loop. Thought you'd be too busy to keep a promise to little ol' me."

"Hee-hee-hee, you know how it is. But it's too late to join now, you had your chance!"

"Ha-ha-ha, that I did. Big mistake on my part!"

This bookshop is the place where the goddess gave me her Blessing.

She took me here after we met, and I received Falna soon after. This is the birthplace of our familia.

The elderly human shop owner looks over Lady Hestia's head and says, "Ah, been a while, Bell." His soft white beard dances with each word.

"Nice to see you again, too," I respond with a short bow.

"Okay, everyone. Just like I explained this morning, we're going to help get the storage room back into shape. Think of this as some community service, so do your best."

With that, we set to work.

I wonder what Haruhime's doing right now…

I pick up the first pile of books I find in the storage room and carry it out, but my brain can't stop thinking about her.

We spent only a couple of hours together, but that fleeting smile of hers won't get out of my head.

*I wonder if she's waiting for her first customer…*My cheeks flush red and I shake my head back and forth, trying to get that image out of my mind.

I sigh and go back into the first floor of the bookshop.

Welf, Lilly, and Mikoto are already inside, their backs to me as they focus on lining up books. The goddess isn't in here, though. My best guess is she's probably in another room with the owner, going over paperwork.

"…Um, Miss Mikoto."

"What is it, Sir Bell?"

I set down the pile of books in an open spot and get Mikoto's attention.

She turns away from the books…I have to ask her what's been on my mind since this morning.

"Do you know a renart named Haruhime?"

"Wh-where did you hear that name?!"

Her whole body flinches for a moment before she rushes over to me.

Lilly and Welf turn to listen as I start to explain what occurred last night. How I happened to find her in the red-light district, and how she happened to end up in Orario.

All of them listen intently to my story, but every so often I see Mikoto tremble. She straightens up each time, regaining her composure…She has one hand across her chest, her eyes locked on the floor by the time I finish.

"If it's okay…Could you tell me how you and the other members of *Takemikazuchi Familia* know Haruhime?"

I want to know more about her. I made my request as earnestly as possible without sounding desperate.

Mikoto stands there for a long moment, collecting her thoughts. Finally, she slowly nods.

"…I have spoken of this before, but the six of us were raised by Lord Takemikazuchi and a few other deities in a shrine."

Indeed, she told us that Ouka, Chigusa, and everyone else were orphans after the War Game was over. Each of them was taken in by the shrine under different circumstances, but they lived together like one big family.

"We traveled to Orario from the Far East for financial reasons…Our shrine was too impoverished to support children in need."

More orphans coming in but almost no income to help feed them. The days of living off scraps had piled up, and something had to be done.

They met with the gods and goddesses of the shrine and made their decision. The oldest and strongest orphans, the ones able to fight, would travel across the ocean with Lord Takemikazuchi to Orario.

This city is blessed with an unlimited resource known as the Dungeon. They would make money with their own hands and send it back there to support their home shrine.

I'd felt like this since the first time I heard the story but…the fact that I came here just because I wanted to meet girls makes me want to dig a hole and hide inside out of shame.

Setting aside those feelings for the moment, I can tell Mikoto is about to get to the important part, so I focus on listening to her.

Even Welf and Lilly have stopped working and turn to listen to Mikoto's story.

"I first met Haruhime long before the journey to Orario…About ten years have passed since then."

Mikoto avoids making any eye contact, her gaze scanning the floor as she recounts those memories for us.

"Our shrine was located on a mountain. Lady Haruhime's manor was located at the foot of it. Born into a life of luxury, she had never once left that manor. Her world was completely different from ours…but Lord Takemikazuchi took pity on her."

—All of you, bring her into the outside world.

It was a strange order, but Lord Takemikazuchi had given it with a childlike smile—at least that's what Mikoto says.

Lord Takemikazuchi is a god of war, more specifically of styles of combat. He'd been training all of them since the day they'd arrived at the shrine, so Mikoto, Chigusa, Ouka, and the others had no trouble sneaking into the manor and bringing Haruhime outside to play.

"So that would mean that you and Haruhime are childhood friends…?"

"Yes, it would. However, her family discovered our activities. After that day, their patrols became more frequent and thorough…"

Being nobility, the family couldn't let this slide. Haruhime's father was furious with them…Luckily, Lord Takemikazuchi stepped in and apologized on all fours, the dogeza technique, until her father agreed to let them off easy.

"He's very quick to apologize, for a god." I hear Lilly's voice come from across the room. Judging by her tone, this is hitting her just as hard as it's hitting Welf and me.

"We brought her outside many times. Climbing the mountain, chasing through the fields, splashing around in the river…But it all came to an abrupt end."

"Was that when…?"

"Yes. It came at a time when shrine donations were increasing and all of us were too busy to go to the manor…On the night before we were planning to make our first visit in weeks, we were informed that Haruhime had been disowned."

She was chased out of her own home. Mikoto and the others searched for any clues as to her whereabouts but came up empty-handed…

This probably had something to do with that prum man Haruhime told me about.

From there, she was sold and came to the continent, to Orario.

Takemikazuchi Familia arrived here about two years ago.

Haruhime had already been in the city for some time.

“My time with Lady Haruhime may have been much shorter than the years I’ve spent with Captain Ouka and the others…but we were more than just acquaintances. I would call her my friend.”

Mikoto fell silent to signal the end of her story.

There’s a great deal of remorse in her words…I can feel her pain from here.

A heavy silence falls around us.

“…Lilly thinks this is obvious, but…”

A soft voice breaks the uneasy tranquility on the first floor of the bookshop.

Welf is leaning against a bookshelf with his arms crossed. Lilly’s standing next to him. She continues.

“Please don’t think of trying to rescue that renart.”

“!!”

“Of course. We just finished a War Game, and taking action right now would cause another one, yes?”

We put everything we had into it and somehow managed to emerge victorious, but Lilly says that all came with a price.

Becoming famous is one thing. At the same time, however, information about us circulates much faster than before and more people want information about us. Many familias are researching us at this very moment.

That blast of cold truth pops the balloon of happiness that had been in my heart since those kids recognized me this morning.

“*Ishtar Familia* is completely different from what *Apollo Familia* was. Stop to consider what it would be like to fight their members one-on-one.”

“…!”

“As we are now, even if we manage to convince others to help us, we would be completely wiped out.”

The difference in strength is too great. That’s exactly what Eina told me…

Lilly’s words are so direct, so powerful that I can’t string together a response. Mikoto opens and closes her mouth many times, but she can’t say anything, either.

“Above all else, Lady Hestia would bear the largest burden. She might not realize it herself, but after the War Game, she has territory. Other deities will want to take it from her and cast her out.”

We shouldn't bring this to her attention. The goddess has enough to worry about as it is.

Lilly's small rant comes to an end. Her frigid tone held nothing back.

Bringing up the goddess felt like the final lock of a straitjacket. There's nothing I can say now.

Mikoto can't even look at Lilly. She's slumping over, clearly hurting.

"Hey, you don't have to play devil's advocate."

Welf tapped Lilly on the back of the head a few times with the book in his right hand.

Lilly didn't know how to react at first. But then she smacks the book away.

"L-Lilly's no devil's advocate!"

But she's blushing. I watch for a moment and realize what's going on, thanks to Welf.

Lilly was forcing herself into this role—playing the bad guy.

Doing it for our familia, for the goddess, and for us.

Mikoto's figured it out, too. Lilly hides her face as Welf steps forward and takes on the persona of a big brother.

"As a member of this familia, I have to agree with Li'l E. I refuse to put us in danger.

"But." That word catches my attention. Mikoto and I immediately look up at him.

"If the two of you want to do something, I'm here to help. I'll see it through to the end, right next to you."

Words of encouragement! I see Mikoto's face light up as a new hope swells in my chest. I still can't form words, but for a completely different reason.

My position, my hopes, and the responsibilities that come with them.

I'm weighing all of it in my head, but it's so heavy that I can't move.

There's no clear answer, but it has to be here…I open my mouth to speak when suddenly—

"HEY! Back to work! We're not leaving here until this place is spotless!!"

The goddess came to check on us. She's standing in the doorframe, yelling at the top of her lungs.

Our conversation comes to an immediate halt. Muscles springing back to life, all of us quickly jump back to our stations and our hands grab the first books in sight.

"This conversation stays between us. Lady Hestia can't know about it."

Lilly whispers just loud enough for us to hear after Lady Hestia exits. She warns us that it would only make the goddess worry.

All of us give her a quick nod. "And!" She locks eyes with me.

"Mr. Bell, please don't even think about going to the Pleasure Quarter tonight! It will only cause more problems!!"

"O-okay."

How did she know that I wanted to go check on Haruhime? Lilly goes on to say that as long as those Amazons have me marked as a target, going there would only put the familia in more danger. Now I really am forced to stay.

I turn back to the bookshelf, feeling absolutely powerless. The goddess comes back into the room and tells us to split up. Each of us is assigned to a different area.

"Sir Bell, thank you for informing me."

"Miss Mikoto…"

Mikoto thanks me as we make our way through the hallway. I catch a glimpse of the side of her face as we part ways. She's usually very composed, but I can see her true feelings are threatening to spill out…But I have a job to do right now.

I go up the stairs and into another storage room. The air is pungent with the smell of old books.

This is where it all started. The goddess gave me her Blessing in this room.

Bookcases stuffed to their limit stand in front of all four walls, and the floor is littered with piles of books.

A new wave of emotion sweeps over me as I step inside and set to work.

"…"

My eyes are drawn to a certain book sticking out of one of the bookcases. Checking to make sure I'm alone, I make my way over to it.

Carefully picking it up by the spine, I open it.

It's a collection of heroic stories that I remember reading when I was young. I flip through the pages as my eyes race across them.

There are quite a few of them in here. Memories come bubbling up as I go, until my eyes fall on a specific picture with the passage:

“I know of the atrocities you have committed, wretched Babylon!

How many men have you ensnared and dragged down a path of darkness and pain?

Have you no shame, common whore?”

It’s a scene where the main hero rejects a confession of love from a prostitute.

The hero is standing over the lewdly clad prostitute, glaring at her.

There are piles of male corpses in an arc behind the woman. There’s no denying that the hero is in the right.

—*“Prostitutes are the ruin of heroes.”*

Haruhime said that to me last night.

Yes, prostitutes are the min of heroes.

At the very least, it’s written here in this book about heroes.

This hero just happens to have experienced a lot of pain by getting involved with one.

By rejecting her, he incites her rage. She attempts to seek revenge but is slain by the hero’s hand in the end.

Prostitutes are the objects of contempt, compassion, or empathy, perhaps, but never as someone to be saved from their fate.

Those women have gone down an unclean path and are often the subjects of scorn and disdain.

The heroes I’ve looked up to since childhood more than likely wouldn’t try to help them.

“…No.”

It’s just as Haruhime said.

Prostitutes, who have sold their bodies and hearts for profit, would never have a hero come to their rescue.

They wouldn’t be allowed to…stand among the heroes.

“…”

My eyes glance over the tragic story of this hero as I stand next to the bookcase.

Feelings of powerlessness and gloom grip my heart. If it was going to make me feel like this, maybe I shouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place, shouldn’t have felt any compassion for her, shouldn’t have learned anything.

I keep asking questions and trying to answer them inside my head, hoping that some passing thought might solve all my problems.

But I know I don’t want to regret meeting her.

Each meeting is something special to be treasured, I’m sure of it.

“…Gramps, I…”

I replay the conversation downstairs in my mind. Things that I should do, things that I want to do. My head heavy with words and voices, I glance outside at the twilight.

The deep red in the western sky is being overtaken by the darkness of night.

◆

A golden-yellow moon hung high in the night sky.

Haruhime stared up at it from her place in the gallery.

She gazed at the light beaming down, tracing its path all the way to the other brothels in the red-light district. Tonight was just as busy as last night.

Sitting next to her was a large group of humans and other demi-humans, all wearing red kimonos. The eyes of many potential male customers passed over them.

However, on this night Haruhime sat on her knees with her back pointed straight up and her eyes looking through the crowd of men.

—Is he there, is he there?

She was looking for the white head of the boy she met last night.

Her golden bushy tail flicked back and forth each time a new face came into view.

Last night was truly…

Fun. It was like a dream.

She hadn’t experienced anything like it since the olden days when her friends would come and take her out of the manor in her hometown.

His kindness and warmth had had a profound effect on Haruhime.

And his ruby-red eyes were stunningly beautiful.

They were so pure she could see clear into his heart.

She couldn’t help but smile every time she remembered any one of the stories they talked about. Her chest felt warm whenever she thought of his voice.

“Maaaster!”

One of the women seated in front of Haruhime in the lineup called out to a passing man, her lusty voice filled with excitement.

There had once been another woman who worked alongside Haruhime who developed feelings for a customer.

Another animal person like herself, Haruhime could still remember the triumphant look in her eyes when she declared, “You wouldn’t understand.

“Only when you fall in love will you know.” Those were her words.

That, or something close to it, might be what she was feeling now.

It was just like those stories she’d read in her youth. A hero would suddenly appear and whisk her away to a different world, saving her from an empty life, just like how the heroines fell for their rescuers.

If…if that boy…

The power of her imagination had deteriorated substantially since her childhood. But now it was reinvigorated.

While few in number, she did know of a few prostitutes who had received “redemption” from an adventurer and left the Pleasure Quarter for good.

Most of them, however, were once again alone after said adventurer failed to return from the Dungeon and they fell on hard times…The others left Orario behind, traveling the world together as partners.

If this dream came true for her—Haruhime’s train of thought came to a crashing halt.

It was only her imagination, but she couldn’t believe that she let such a frivolous idea connect itself with the boy.

Prostitutes didn’t deserve that kind of opportunity. She couldn’t do anything and therefore was worthless.

But more importantly, *Lady Ishtar would never let me leave*.

“…”

Haruhime ran her fingers down the black collar around her throat. She let her head fall, resigning herself to her fate.

Despite being surrounded by the other prostitutes in the vibrant

Pleasure Quarter, she had never felt more alone.

There was a great demand for them in Orario.

The fastest way for someone to earn money in the city, other than becoming an adventurer, was to sell their body in the Pleasure Quarter. Once they had gained notoriety—by developing connections with famous adventurers and influential familias—they could wield a bit of power.

With a strong familia in their court, Haruhime had been told, the feeling rivals that of becoming a queen.

There are many prostitutes who heard stories of this as well and came to Orario of their own free will. Even without a Blessing, they were able to use this power to set up their own establishments.

Just like for adventurers, becoming well known in the Labyrinth City meant that a person acquired influence as well. The promise of power had drawn in most of the prostitutes she knew. Very few shared a past like hers.

The only reason that she had value as a prostitute was because of her race. Renarts were extremely rare and would attract many customers.

…I…

It might have been easier for her to scream out, "Why was I doomed to this fate?"

Or she could have directed all her anger at the prum noble who created this mess in the first place.

But she lacked the courage to scream and was too afraid to hate another person.

Haruhime knew this about herself.

"Not that face again. Flash a grin already."

The more experienced prostitute sitting next to her quietly scolded Haruhime for looking depressed in the lineup.

Her head and shoulders snapped up as a reflex. Her face emerged above the front row of the gallery, revealing her to all the men standing outside the brothel that served as her prison.

She had been very proud of her golden locks as a child living in the manor. But now, they were her least favorite feature.

Her ears and golden hair made her stick out like a sore thumb. Every one of the men standing outside instantly looked at her.

It was the same as always.

A dreamy expression overtook a slender chienthrope when their eyes met.

Never look away from a customer, even if he's not your type—the voice of her superior jolted through her mind. She maintained eye contact with the dog person and did her best to make a doll-like smile.

She could see the wheels turning in his head, the courage he was trying to build up. The dog person kept his eyes on her as he ran to the brothel entrance connected to the gallery.

That's right, the boy was quite surprised…

Last night's chance encounter replaying in her mind, it looked like she'd be selling herself once again tonight.

Her face remained as emotionless as a smiling doll's, but the other prostitutes in the lineup spotted something interesting outside.

"Hey there, lover boy!"

"Hunky man, why don'cha call on me tonight?"

A new face had appeared just outside the wooden fence—a young human with graceful features. The working ladies immediately greeted him with enthusiasm.

He was looking at each of the prostitutes in turn, until finally his gaze landed on Haruhime.

His eyes shot open as the young man jumped forward and clung to the wooden fence with all his might.

"Lady Haruhime?! It is I—Mikoto!"

Haruhime stopped breathing.

The voice, and the serious, straightforward look in the human's eyes were enough to know "he" was telling the truth.

It was her childhood friend who should be far away from here —Mikoto, disguised as a man.

Haruhime had been unable to witness the War Game because no Divine Mirrors had been opened in the red-light district. She'd had no way of knowing that someone from her past was living in the same city. Confusion and panic now threatened to overtake her.

Frozen in place, her body began to shake so hard that a small ring on her collar started to clatter.

—Why here, why now?!

This was not the joyous reunion she had envisioned, but the deepest pits of her despair.

The final dream she'd kept, returning to her homeland and happily embracing the friends who had meant so much to her, was gone, shattered. Her past self who lived in their memories was completely destroyed, now that they knew what had become of her.

So embarrassing!! So humiliating!! So utterly humiliating!!

The last of the shame she possessed set her body on fire from within. She wanted to scream, “Don’t look at me!” at the top of her lungs. She would have given anything for a knife to cut the soiled clothing off her body so she could tear it to shreds.

Why…

Why now? Why did she have to come now?

If only this day had come a few days later, she would never have had to face this shameful reunion.

The other women followed Mikoto’s line of sight; now everyone was staring at Haruhime. Trembling from head to tail, she forced her mouth open to speak.

“…You must have me confused with another. I do not know you…”

Tears started to well up behind Mikoto’s wide, unblinking eyes.

A woman appeared in the doorway that led to the reception desk. Taking in the moment, she raised her voice.

“Haruhime, you have a customer.”

“At once…”

Willing her body to remain still, the renart rose to her feet.

Mikoto pressed herself against the fence and desperately called out to Haruhime before she disappeared from sight.

“Wait, please wait, Lady Haruhime!”

Looking away from her childhood friend, Haruhime left the gallery.

“Don’t make a fool of yourself today.”

Haruhime passed a particularly tan Amazon in the hallway. She said nothing in response to the other woman’s blunt instructions.

“Yes, ma’am,” she finally said, her mind surfacing for a brief moment from the darkness that had overtaken her. The Amazon continued on her way, leaving Haruhime alone with her thoughts as she walked to the room where a man was most likely waiting for her.

◆

The glowing lanterns of the red-light district glistened far below.

Aisha watched the flow of people going through the Far

Eastern–style portion of the Pleasure Quarter until the squeak of a door signaled the arrival of the one who had called this meeting. She stepped away from the window and walked to the middle of the room.

Members of *Ishtar Familia* had gathered in a spacious meeting room on the twentieth floor of their home.

A group of Amazons had grabbed chairs and sofas from the space and dragged them into the middle—said Amazons being the leaders of the familia as well as the strongest warriors among them. The Berbera had assembled. Phryne claimed one of the largest sofas for herself and occupied a spot in the very middle of the room.

Aisha roughly plopped her full weight onto an open sofa and waited for their deity, Ishtar, to walk up to their makeshift circle of sofas and chairs.

"Looks like everybody's here."

Her personal assistant, Tammuz, was quick to pull up a chair for his goddess. Ishtar took a long drag from her pipe before taking a seat.

The reason that everyone had gathered here tonight was because Ishtar had issued an urgent summons.

"Calling a meeting out of the blue like this, what happened, Lady Ishtar?"

"I was plannin' on huntin' down a particularly nice male tonight."

Ishtar paid no mind to the Amazons' complaints and opened her mouth to speak.

"All of you avoid Freya's brats—and bring me Bell Cranell."

The congregation fell silent.

Then, almost immediately, "But you'll just devour him, Lady Ishtar!" And a wave of other complaints surged forward from the Amazons. The jealousy in their voices was obvious, but all Ishtar did was say, "Settle down," with a grin.

"What was the part about avoidin' *Freya Familia*?"

Aisha leaned back onto her sofa and raised a different question. Ishtar answered.

"It seems that she's obsessed with the boy but isn't making a move for some reason. And I'm going to snatch him before she does."

An ominous smile appeared over a beautiful face that could make anyone stand and stare any other time.

"The moment she learns that her favorite pip-squeak has fallen for me…Oh, how I'd love to see that face."

The goddess's eyes closed and her lips curled up as she envisioned exactly how the events would unfold.

"How tasteless," came the voices of the Berbera as they grinned to one another. Ishtar looked at each of their faces in turn and issued a warning.

"I forbid any of you to feast—especially Phryne."

"…Ge-ge-ge-geh. Unthinkable, Lady Ishtar. Me, ignore your orders?"

The leader of the group, bearing the title of Androctonus, had been silent up to that point. She took Ishtar's thinly veiled threat in stride.

Ishtar's eyes narrowed, as if she could tell that the massive Amazon had something else in mind.

"No snacking, either. The moment *you* get your hands on him, he's useless to me. I get him first…Once he's filled his purpose, I'll give him to all of you to do what you wish."

PHOOO. Ishtar exhaled a thick cloud of purple smoke.

Phryne couldn't hide her disappointment as the smoke washed over her face. However, she couldn't go against her goddess and reluctantly accepted her conditions.

Aisha and the other Amazons stuck their tongues out at the dejected Phryne, taunting her.

"But you know, Lady Ishtar…"

"What is it, Samira?"

"Is now the best time to take Bell Cranell? I think it best to wait until after the Killing Stone Ritual to make a move."

Samira, an Amazon with hair the color of ash, voiced her opinion in a distinctly male way.

"I learned of Bell Cranell from a rather unwilling messenger…I don't trust him to keep his mouth shut. It won't be long before Freya realizes I know how to hurt her. Take the boy before she can protect him."

Ishtar paused for a moment as she looked out over her followers. Another out-of-place smile grew on her lips as her amethyst eyes burned from within.

"Once the ritual is complete, *we declare war on Freya*. That pipsqueak's going to make one hell of an opening bell…All of you, be prepared."

She was going to use Bell to start their war—the Amazons showed no hint of cowardice, only smiled like wolves on the hunt. Phryne's frog-like lips bulged out into a grin as well.

Aisha was the only one to remain stone-faced and silent.

"Ge-ge-ge-ge-geh. So how do we get the trophy bunny? Where do we spring the trap?"

The other Amazons licked their lips after hearing what Phryne had to say.

"Aboveground is too dangerous, avoid it."

Ishtar joined the conversation.

Every person in Orario was paying attention to *Hestia Familia* after the War Game. Word would spread quickly should anything happen to one of their members. It wouldn't take long for the Guild or the enemy to hear about it.

"There are too many eyes in Orario," is how Ishtar put it.

"In that case…the Dungeon it is."

It was Aisha who put everyone's thoughts into words.

All adventurers knew that if you were going to commit a crime, the Dungeon was the place to do it. The middle levels were the best place because only upper-class adventurers could enter them. The chances of being discovered were extremely slim.

"How do we bait the rabbit?"

"Just using Lady Ishtar's name will get us what we need. Grab anything you think will be useful."

In the place of their arrogant leader, Aisha took a more realistic approach in answering her allies' questions.

Phryne huffed through her nose, as if bored with the idea. "Problem?" retorted Aisha with a glare.

"Should we bring Haruhime?"

Samira's short ash-gray hair shifted as she turned away from Phryne and Aisha's staring contest.

The Amazon was looking at Ishtar, but the goddess knew her question was aimed at everyone in the room. It was an interesting proposal.

"Do as you wish, but…What, is the Little Rookie that strong?"

"If nothing else, he's faster than all of us."

Sure, they had been trying to hold off Phryne at the time. But the Amazons recounted to their goddess how they'd failed to capture their prey during the hunt last night. Most of the participants were Level 3.

"I had some idea after watching the battle with Hyacinthus… But how is a newly ranked-up Level Three so fast?"

The new record holder wasn't pulling off an elaborate scam; he was genuinely at Level 3.

Aisha couldn't agree more with Samira's words.

"I don't care if you useless varmints want to use Haruhime. Use anything you want, just corner the boy. I'll take care of the rest."

Phryne's declaration didn't sit well with the other Amazons. All of them shot her sideways glances filled with disdain.

At Level 5, she was the only one who could keep up with their prey. Aisha rolled her eyes before glancing toward the window.

Although she couldn't see it, the red-light district was just beneath her gaze.

"…Haruhime is a bumbling fool, barely a part of the familia. Why not let her out and spread her wings one last time?"

Aisha's proposal caught the rest of the Amazons off guard. Every set of eyes in the room immediately focused on her.

Phryne's brutish voice sounded almost immediately.

"Are you brain-dead? What if she ran away? Or was that your plan all along, Aishaaa?"

"…"

"We can't let anyone else know about *that,* now, can we?"

Veins bulged in Phryne's forehead; her eyes looked ready to kill. Aisha didn't answer.

For the first time, no one came to Aisha's defense. In fact, Samira added fuel to the fire.

"What the hell do you see in that timid fox? As for me, I hate her."

Samira's lips twitched back into an awkward grin. Ishtar remained silent, only puffing another cloud of smoke into the middle of the group.

Aisha glanced into the cloud, only to see two amethyst eyes glimmering menacingly on the other side. A chill ran down her spine, her body quivering.

Aisha gritted her teeth and willed her body to be still. At long last, Ishtar blinked.

"Of course not."

That was the end of it.

Aisha's proposal ignored, they started to work on setting a trap for the rabbit.

Aisha exhaled through her nose and once again cast her gaze to the night sky out the window.

An almost full moon shone brightly over the glow of the red-light district.

* * *

In the darkest hour of the night…

The sharp echoes of high heels echoed in the highest level of the white tower in the middle of Orario.

The sharp sounds grew louder as a figure wearing an extremely revealing black dress stepped with much more force than necessary down a hallway. The figure's pearly white skin emerged from the shadows as she arrived in front of a tall door. Her assistant was waiting for her, and he opened the large wooden barrier to let her inside.

"Ottar, my wine."

Moonlight penetrated the glass windows of the highest floor of Babel Tower, filling the room with long shadows. The Goddess of Beauty, Freya, said nothing else as she took a seat in her chair.

Her long silver hair curled on top of her shoulders and extended down beyond her feminine back all the way to her delicate, thin waist.

Her assistant, a boaz with a boar-like body built like a mountain, quietly followed his mistress's instructions.

"Is something troubling you?"

Ottar placed the glass of wine on an extravagant table carved to look like a bountiful basket of fruit, then he waited for his goddess to take a sip and asked her a question.

A rare foul mood lurked beneath her normally calm and peaceful exterior. Ottar lowered his head as Freya glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Have you heard nothing from Mia?"

"No."

If her assistant's short answer had offended her, Freya showed no sign of it. She did, however, gulp down another mouthful of wine.

The rest of her silver locks fell off her shoulders as she rocked her head back. Removing the now mostly empty glass from her lips, she turned to face her assistant and spoke.

Information had been acquired from a certain god—that another Goddess of Beauty, Ishtar, had become aware of something important.

“Is it wise to continue to leave that god to his own devices?”

“Indeed, I should punish him next time we meet.”

Hermes would have passed out from fright had he been present for this conversation.

Freya ran her fingers through her hair, curling the silver locks around her fingertips.

“I hated Ishtar watching my every move, so I behaved myself for quite a while…but it’s gotten old.”

She was pouting, very unlike her usual self.

His goddess had been offended. Ottar clamped his mouth shut but could not control the expression of anger on his face.

Freya sighed, completely oblivious to the horrifying visage behind her that would have sent a Minotaur running out of sheer terror.

“Ishtar knows about that child. As long as she doesn’t do something stupid, that’s fine.”

“…Such as attack him in cold blood?”

“That would be rather cute, actually.”

Despite Ottar’s concerns for the boy’s safety, Freya saw past it to the real danger.

Considering the discord between them—caused by her rival’s overwhelming jealousy—Freya had a general idea of what Ishtar was planning.

There was only one solution. Freya quietly sighed again.

“Shall we take Bell Cranell into our protection?”

“…No, wait.”

Freya paused for a moment to consider her assistant’s suggestion before sharply striking it down.

“My apologies,” said Ottar, lowering his head once again. Freya didn’t look at him, instead casting her gaze out the large glass window.

She took in the view from Orario’s highest point, eyes tracing the cityscape for a few moments.

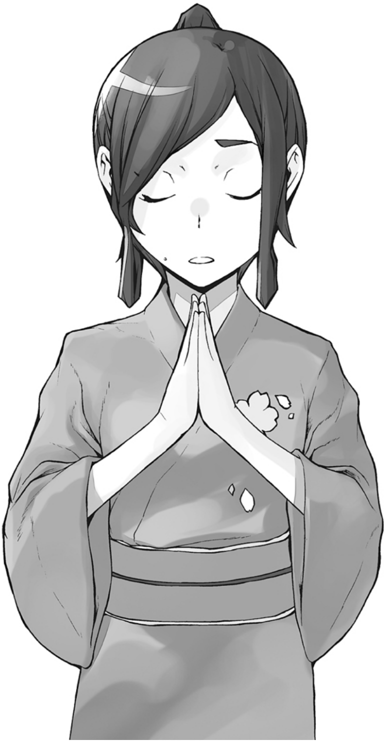
Her head slowly turned until Ottar came into her line of sight.

“Keep an eye on Ishtar’s children. Inform the others…I will reside at home for the time being.”

“As you wish.”

Ottar’s courteous response filling her ears, Freya downed the last bit of her wine.

CHAPTER 4 YOSHIWARA X UTAKATA



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CHAPTER 4

YOSHIWARA X UTAKATA

“I’m finished…”

We’re eating breakfast under the first rays of sunlight to reach over the city wall.

Mikoto sounds like she didn’t sleep at all last night as she slides her chair away from the table.

She didn’t eat much, only one piece of bread. Soup and salad untouched, she says anyone can have her Jyaga Maru Kun. It’s still sitting on a plate all by itself.

Clearly not hungry, she trudges her way to the sink to wash her plate, and I catch a glimpse of her downcast face. The goddess, Lilly, and Welf look just as worried about her as I am.

“Say, Mikoto, is something wrong?”

“Miss Mikoto was out late last night…”

The goddess leans out of her chair, closely followed by Lilly. Mikoto doesn’t even turn around, just sets her plate out to dry and leaves the kitchen.

Welf makes eye contact with me and I nod back. Forgetting good manners for now, I wolf down my remaining breakfast as quickly as possible.

I leave the cleanup to Welf and follow Mikoto.

“Miss Mikoto!”

“Sir Bell…”

Still dragging her feet, she was about to head out the front door.

She looks up at me. Her normally dignified dark-purple gaze is nowhere to be seen.

“So you did go last night…”

Mikoto’s shoulders hunch over as she weakly nods.

Just as I thought, she went to check on Haruhime. I can kind of guess what happened by looking at her face…but I ask her to tell me about it anyway.

She lightly nods again. Preferring to sit down, we go outside onto the front lawn and find a spot filled with empty boxes and barrels on the corner of the property. Both of us take a seat.

"I went back and called upon Lady Haruhime…but I was rejected."

She starts telling me everything that happened.

Apparently she couldn't sit still after our conversation at the bookshop.

Disguising herself as a man, she went to the red-light district under the cover of night.

Her gaze falls to the grass at her feet, clearly hurting.

"She claimed not to know who I was…"

Judging by the reaction, I don't think that Haruhime knew her childhood friends were in Orario. I wasn't there to see the "rejection," but maybe Haruhime was just startled by the sudden reunion?

Or perhaps…she didn't want her friend to see her as a prostitute.

It's just a guess, but after spending several hours with her, I don't think she would have been excited to see Mikoto.

"…Um, Miss Mikoto. What was Miss Haruhime like, back in the Far East?"

I don't even know why I want to know this much about her.

I should be trying to cheer up Mikoto, but I bring this up instead.

"…She was well mannered, elegant, and gentle to a fault. With no knowledge of the outside world, even the most mundane things surprised her…made her happy."

Mikoto doesn't take her eyes off the grass as the words kind of tumble out of her mouth.

She's lost in her memories.

"She was a timid person. Different from Lady Chigusa, Lady Haruhime was always concerned if she was allowed to be where she was, constantly anxious…That's why it brought me great joy whenever she smiled."

Haruhime as a little girl…I can imagine her soft golden hair and innocent smile.

"Most of all, she was very kind. Even before we met, Lady

Haruhime heard rumors about the shrine just visible from behind her manor in the mountain…She asked her father to send a donation of food.”

“She did…?”

“‘Since I cannot eat all this myself, please give some to the gods’…It was the first request she ever made of her father.”

Haruhime had been born into a life of comfort, without fear of hunger. Hearing about how Mikoto and the others lived must’ve been a real shock to her. Hearing about children and gods who clothed themselves with whatever was available and lived by growing and selling roots or other plants from their mountain garden probably sounded like something out of a book.

Mikoto said she already had a love of reading, escaping from her lonely existence into the beautiful worlds among the pages. It was there that she gained the compassion to help people she’d never known. Apparently, she was quite persistent about sending aid to the shrine.

“All of us jumped for joy on the day that food was delivered to us as donations. Of course, we were interested to know who had been so generous. Once we heard it came from the manor at the base of the mountain, Captain Ouka led all of us to the large wooden building. We started looking over their fence…”

That’s when she first saw Haruhime.

Their expansive lawn was well kept, filled with rock gardens and small trees. They first caught a glimpse of her, a renart with a brush in her hand, writing a scroll. But her eyes were looking outside, filled with loneliness.

“While embarrassing to admit, it filled us with courage. This great person had rescued us from hunger; we would save her from desolation.”

Mikoto’s cheeks blush as a small smile appears on her lips.

From there, the children of the shrine consulted with the gods about how to help the girl. That’s when Lord Takemikazuchi learned of Haruhime’s situation and gave them the push they needed.

“Lord Takemikazuchi bestowed us with his Blessing so that we could repay Lady Haruhime for her kindness.”

He had refused to do it until they completed his combat training. However, he gave in after seeing the virtue in their purpose.

That means she…received her Status to help Haruhime?

"The rest I explained yesterday. All of us worked together to sneak into the manor and bring Lady Haruhime outside."

Using the techniques they learned from Lord Takemikazuchi, as well as their Statuses, they had an easy time avoiding the adults on patrol and taking Haruhime outside to play at night.

Mikoto grimaces and says that from Haruhime's father's point of view, they were nothing more than bad karma for a good deed.

"At first, Lady Haruhime was startled. Children she'd never met before suddenly appearing in her bedroom and telling her to come with them…"

However, once they convinced her to leave, Haruhime got her first taste of excitement.

After two or three times, the renart waited excitedly for the group of kids her own age to return at night.

"Even after we were discovered, we continued to sneak in to visit her…She said to us…"

The manor was more heavily guarded than ever.

A group of children had evaded patrols to bring their friend outside.

Two figures, one with golden hair and one with black, running hand-in-hand through rice patties in the moonlight.

The young girl stopping to catch her breath, blushing as she looked at her friends, smiling.

—Mikoto, Ouka, all of you are like the heroes from a book.

The other black-haired figures stop running, turn to face her, and smile back.

"We were happy, proud to consider her our friend. We had repaid the debt…We had made the lonely girl smile."

Mikoto goes on to say that they took Haruhime to many places around the mountain.

The troublemakers who kept kidnapping his daughter—the lord of the manor stopped sending assistance to the children of the shrine, but that didn't stop Mikoto and her friends from finding ways into his manor.

Ouka, Chigusa, Mikoto, and the other members of *Takemikazuchi Familia* played and laughed together with Haruhime…until that day came.

A smile had been growing on Mikoto's face as she recounted their old adventures. Suddenly, like waking up from a dream, she looked back down at the ground.

Then, Haruhime was sold to another country and became a prostitute.

Meanwhile, they journeyed to Orario two years ago, fought tooth and nail to gain excelia to improve their slowly growing Statuses, and were finally getting results.

Ouka, and then Mikoto, ranked up.

And now they were involved with a well-known “rookie” and had gained a little notoriety in their own right.

Mikoto and Haruhime had taken very different paths to suddenly reunite in a big city far from home.

Mikoto’s voice quivers as she recounts their unexpected reunion and how their positions had changed.

“If she is in pain, I want to be of help…No, I want to return to how things were once before.”

Mikoto couldn’t keep her voice steady as she revealed her deepest wish.

Reaching around, she runs her fingers over where her Status is engraved on her back.

“This is rather selfish…but I want to see Lady Haruhime smile once again.”

Only then do I notice the tears running down her cheeks. She quickly wipes them away with her arm and falls silent.

Once again, I have no idea what to say to a crying girl.

Our conversation over, I wait with Mikoto until she calms down.

Apologizing for the shameful sight, she says she was planning on visiting the Guild. Despite knowing it would be pointless, she wants to see if there are any other options she could pursue.

I ask to go with her. I doubt I can make much difference, but I don’t want to just sit around, either.

She agrees and the two of us leave through the front gate.

“…”

“…”

We step out onto the street in front of our home in silence.

Both of our heads are filled with thoughts of Haruhime. Saying anything at this point would just be a pointless attempt at licking each other’s wounds, so we keep our mouths shut.

If anyone saw us now, they’d probably comment on how depressed we look walking side by side like this.

"H-hey there, Bell. Little Mikoto."

"…Lord Hermes?"

We're less than a block away from home.

Lord Hermes suddenly appears from behind a few trees. The feather in his cap bouncing as he walks, he stops right in front of us.

This is strange, like he was just waiting for someone to come out of our home…

"Um, have the two of you had any run-ins recently? Like, say, a lot of Amazons all at once…?"

"Wh-what kind of question is that…?"

Mikoto is the first one to respond to Lord Hermes's very unexpected inquiry. Well, then again, Aisha and a lot of Amazons chased me half to death a few nights ago, but…

Lord Hermes is alone again today and very anxious about something. I kind of feel sorry for him.

He's playing with the brim of his feathered hat and can't look at me for more than a few seconds at a time. On his third pass, he notices that we're not doing all that well, either.

"You two seem a bit glum…Something happen?"

Mikoto and I chance a glance at each other and look to the ground.

The air around Lord Hermes instantly changes and he flashes a charming smile.

"If you consider me worthy, I could lend you some advice."

"Um…"

"I swear on my divinity that anything said will stay between us."

He takes off his cap and places it over his heart.

"I am a god, after all. I might be able to help."

Even his tone has changed—it's more powerful, the voice of someone who can guide the lost children of Gekai. He even flashes a wink.

Mikoto and I look at each other once again…then to Lord Hermes, and we nod.

We want to do something about Haruhime's situation, and if there's any chance that Lord Hermes can help us out, we'll take it.

* * *

There’s a place to go for secret meetings.

At least that’s what Lord Hermes told us as he leads the way to a small café on the southwest side of the city. I’ve been through here once before, when I met the goddess in Amour Square.

We had to weave our way through narrow paths in order to find this café, Wish.

Apparently, this little place has quite the following. It has a very modern design and everything is nice and clean inside and out. Looking in through the windows, we can see it’s completely full of young couples.

An elf hostess wearing thin-rimmed glasses meets us at the front door and guides us to a seat at the back of the café.

“I see…So your friend is a prostitute.”

Lord Hermes takes a sip of his tea as I bring him up to speed on the situation.

Mikoto kept her eyes on the table while I spoke, looking up only from time to time. Now all we can do is wait for his response.

“I’d listen to Lilly, she has a very good point. If you tried to go and take your friend out of the brothel by force…it’d be the same as pointing a blade at Ishtar herself. I really can’t recommend that.”

Lord Hermes continues, saying that *Hestia Familia* wouldn’t stand a chance if a skirmish broke out. Every one of his words feels heavy. Mikoto can’t even look at him now. Lilly, Welf, and the goddess would be dragged into this if we did anything rash. That much is obvious.

And Mikoto just underwent conversion…She can’t leave the familia.

If that were an option, she wouldn’t have to worry about the rest of us and could go in by herself.

Just one look at the side of her face tells me that that was running through her mind, too.

“Generally speaking, familias stay out of one another’s hair. So if you stick your neck out to help a friend in another group, you’re going to cause more problems than you solve.”

Our faces grow dark. Lord Hermes’s tone didn’t leave any chance of misunderstanding.

So there’s nothing we can do. I’ve never felt so powerless.

“—However, prostitutes are another story.”

His voice sounds a lot brighter this time.

““What?”” We respond in unison, willing away our disappointment with smiles.

"It all depends on her rank…her standing within the familia. If she's near the bottom or a noncombatant, redemption might be an option."

"Redemption"—Hermes explains the rule exclusive to the Pleasure Quarter.

Simply put, it's a system that allows someone to trade a large amount of money for a prostitute's release.

A person can "buy" a prostitute by paying off her debts or by paying an acceptable amount to the brothel itself, thereby granting her freedom. In this way, upper-class adventurers can turn their favorite prostitute into a lifelong companion. Sounds like it's not all that rare.

I can't say I'm all that comfortable with treating people like merchandise like this, but…right now, this just might be it.

"…Redemption might be possible for the common prostitute… but would *Ishtar Familia* be willing to release one of their members so easily?"

Just as I'm starting to get excited about this, Mikoto states a major problem. I can tell she's forcing her voice to stay calm.

Lord Hermes smiles at her. Does that mean it's not an issue?

"Aren't you forgetting? Ishtar is a Goddess of Beauty and also has the ability to control love, to a point. If a man wishes to offer redemption to one of her own, she wouldn't refuse."

SWISH! Mikoto and I look at each other so fast her hair stands on end. I gulp down the air in my throat.

"The only hurdle left is if your friend is a combatant…or if she's at the lower end. One or the other."

Lady Ishtar isn't about to let a powerful fighter or leader walk away.

Lord Hermes watches our faces carefully, waiting for a response. But I already know the answer. I jump to my feet and lean over the table.

"TH-THAT'S OKAY! I doubt that Miss Haruhime is very high up at all!"

That came out a lot louder than I thought it would.

The Haruhime I met two nights ago in the Pleasure Quarter wasn't a fighter, I'm sure of it!

I'm not sure if she has a Status or not, but judging by the way the Amazons talked about her, there's no doubt in my mind that she's one of the lowest-ranking members of their familia.

All the other couples in the café suddenly spin around to look at me after the outburst. Hermes grins and nods.

"In that case, there could be light at the end of this tunnel."

Mikoto's lips start to quiver the moment Lord Hermes says that. Her mask of hopelessness is slowly breaking away.

Then she jumps up and leans over the table right next to me.

"Wh-what's the cost for redemption?"

"That depends on the prostitute's rank, but…I hear it's usually somewhere between two and three million."

That hits me like a ton of bricks. I clear my throat and hear Mikoto do the same. But—

—It's not impossible to get that much money.

It might take a while, but for a familia capable of working in the middle levels like we can, it's not just wishful thinking.

At last, there's hope.

My cheeks flush as my heart beats faster.

She wants to be taken away from there. Haruhime told me as much that night in the red-light district. Just like how it was in the books she read.

We can help her!

"If it's all right with you, could you tell me more about this girl? I could do a little investigating around Ishtar's establishments, maybe lend a helping hand?"

Mikoto and I had just managed to convince our bodies to sit back down in our chairs when Lord Hermes said that. Looking at Mikoto, I see that she can't contain her happiness any more than I can.

"Haruhime—Lady Sanjyouno Haruhime! She's about my age, and a renart!"

Mikoto wasted no time in taking up Lord Hermes on his offer, and told him her name and race.

"…Renart."

Lord Hermes's eyes go wide. His lips seem to stumble over that word.

That's no act. He's genuinely shocked.

The deity closes his mouth and makes direct eye contact with both of us.

"Lord Hermes…?"

His sudden change of mood is making me worry. I have to ask.

Lord Hermes quietly strings together words.

"This, um, goes against my principles, but…"

He pauses for a moment before continuing.

"Bell, the night I bumped into you in the Pleasure Quarter, I was on my way to Ishtar's with a special package."

"Special package…?"

"It's taboo for a deliveryman to reveal the contents of his client's order—worthy of expulsion, I might add…but I'll do you a favor."

Mikoto tilts her head in confusion. I'm sure my face doesn't look much different from hers, either. Lord Hermes opens his mouth to speak.

"I delivered an item called a Killing Stone."

…Killing Stone?

I blink a few times. Pretty sure I've never heard of that before.

Judging from the expression on Mikoto's face, she hasn't, either.

"That's all I can tell you. Well then, Bell, Mikoto, I'll be seeing you."

Lord Hermes slides back his chair and stands up.

Adjusting his hat, he gazes down on me from the shadow of the brim.

He goes to the counter and pays the bill before disappearing outside, leaving Mikoto and me completely bewildered.

"What was wrong with Lord Hermes?"

"I have no clue. What would cause that sudden change…?"

Mikoto and I leave the café and decide not to visit the Guild. We're going home instead. We need to talk to Lilly and Welf about raising enough money for a redemption.

Mikoto and I are walking side by side, trying to figure out what just happened.

What was Lord Hermes trying to say…For now, I'll put the Killing Stone on the back burner.

We travel through the side streets deep in thought.

"…?"

"Isn't that…"

Our three-story manor is just visible after turning off one of the wider streets when something else catches our attention.

A horse-drawn carriage is parked just outside the front gate.

A snap rings out just moments after we see it. That sound is followed immediately by the horse's whinny and the fancy carriage pulls away.

Mikoto and I quicken our pace, curious. Welf and Lilly are standing next to the gate, the goddess with them. And she's holding a piece of paper.

"Welf, Lilly! Goddess!"

"Ah, Bell. And Mikoto. Glad to see you're home."

"What was that just now?"

The three of them turn to face us when I call. Mikoto asks a question.

Lilly glances at the paper in the goddess's hands and answers.

"A quest from a trading company."

Trading company? I ask for confirmation and Welf nods.

"This is also 'cause of the War Game. One of the greedier ones is looking for money."

"Hm." The goddess, standing between Welf and Lilly, frowns as she rereads the paper.

Judging by the name at the top of the sheet, this company goes by the name Albella.

That means that one of the large trading companies that supports Orario's economy has come directly to *Hestia Familia* with a quest.

There are many items that can be acquired only from us adventurers, which means these relationships are very valuable. Most adventurers never see the deals that go on behind closed doors for the drop items and other materials collected or mined from the Dungeon.

Merchants based on the main continent are particularly fond of items retrieved from the lower levels and deep levels, or so I'm told. Since only a few familias and adventurers can make it that far down, they're willing to pay extra for their services. Therefore, they try to develop relationships with strong familias to satisfy their own clients.

Which means that this company, Albella, witnessed our victory in the War Game and deemed *Hestia Familia* worthy—our arrow is pointed up and they want to build a relationship as quickly as possible.

"Almost like an investment…Happens all the time in Orario."

Merchants sponsor parties of adventurers every day in order to get their hands on rare items from deep within the Dungeon.

Adventurers can buy items for lower prices and in return sell their loot for a little less to the merchants to return the favor. There are advantages for both sides.

There's quite a bit of risk in signing that kind of contract, but a lot of money can be made by not going through the Guild.

"They came to us without informing the Guild, so this isn't an authorized quest. However, they've identified themselves."

Lilly takes another look at the sheet, her eyes zipping through the details as she explains them to us.

"The client is a recognized trading company, much more trustworthy than other unauthorized quests."

Thinking over what Lilly said, I decide to ask for more details about the quest itself.

"So, what do they want us to do?"

"It says here they want a good amount of quartz from the Dungeon's level-fourteen pantry."

The goddess answers my question.

Welf leans over her shoulder for a closer look.

"This is a big reward for something so simple."

"It's their way of asking for more favors in return."

Welf and Lilly make the remarks, gawking at the sheet in the goddess's hand. Mikoto and I make eye contact.

Then we both look at the goddess, step forward, and say:

""H-how much?""

"One million valis."

"O-one million…?!"

The goddess's response is enough to nearly knock the two of us off our feet.

That would take a major chunk out of what we need to pay for a redemption!

"What should we do, Lady Hestia?"

"Hmm…I don't really want to get involved with merchants and companies and all that."

Either she doesn't want to deal with all the paperwork or she's afraid of being taken advantage of, but the goddess doesn't sound too interested.

"I know they came all this way, but let's decline—"

""Let's do it!""

"UWAH?!"

Mikoto and I desperately try to stop the goddess from finishing that sentence.

Our faces beet red, she jumps backward in surprise.

"Not just to establish a connection, and I am fully aware that having something just to have it is quite narrow-minded, but in any case we need money as quickly as possible!"

"I-I agree!"

Mikoto steps forward, saying more words in one breath than I ever could. I step up evenly with her and offer my support.

Mikoto tries again, gesturing with all her might to try and convince the goddess.

"Hnhnnn…Well, my own debt caused problems for everyone… And this is just a quest, so maybe we can talk about it?"

She takes another look at the paper with beads of sweat rolling down her face before finally giving in.

""Th-thank you very much!""

We thank her and immediately slap our hands together in an epic high five.

"What's going on…?"

"Looks like they found something to do."

This must be what a fish feels like after being released back into the water. I can feel Lilly's eyes on us. She must be shocked—after all, we were almost dead on our feet this morning. Even Welf's chuckling at us now.

"While I'm a little concerned you're getting too friendly with Mikoto, Bell…let's go back inside for now."

The four of us follow her back inside to talk about the quest in more detail.

Now that we don't have to kidnap Haruhime from enemy territory, this is the best time to tell everyone about the redemption.

Mikoto's got a pep in her step; I'm pretty sure I do, too. But wait, there's something else I'd like to ask.

"Goddess, what's a Killing Stone?"

"Killing Stone? Never heard of that."

Recounting Lord Hermes's delivery to Lady Ishtar, I explain to everyone that the Goddess of Beauty Ishtar has a Killing Stone. But Lady Hestia looks clueless.

I turn to Welf and Lilly.

"Any ideas, Li'l E?"

"No, Lilly doesn't know anything, either."

No luck.

No one has seen one or even heard of it…Killing Stones must be extremely rare.

It seems a little strange, but I decide to let it slide as we make our way through the front door.

◆

In the end, we decided to accept the quest from the Albella Trading Company.

Lady Hestia kept giving me suspicious looks for some reason when we told her that we can rescue Haruhime, a prostitute, with a redemption. It was Mikoto's earnest pleas that made her begrudgingly accept—Mikoto went out to inform *Takemikazuchi Familia* about Haruhime the moment we finished up.

Neither Lilly nor Welf raised any objections, so *Hestia Familia* embarked on a quest to receive one million valis.

"We're here to complete a quest, yet again."

Now we're prowling the fourteenth floor of the Dungeon.

We spent the last two days following our meeting preparing for the quest and completing the paperwork. Now all that's left is the quest itself. Lilly is carrying her oversize backpack as her earlier comment echoes down the long, rocky tunnels.

Faint light shines down from far above; the air is thick and moist. The holes in the floor that proved to be our worst nightmare only a few weeks ago lurk in the shadows of the Dungeon, which appears to be a normal cave only on the surface.

We passed through the upper levels with no problems whatsoever and arrived in the middle levels with ease. A few quick battles here and there, and our four-person battle party has made it to level fourteen.

"Now, everyone, let's keep moving!"

I can feel the excitement in Mikoto's voice, calling back from the head of our formation.

Swish, swish! Mikoto swipes her katana back and forth in her right hand with all the excitement of a kid on the way to a candy store.

Welf takes his eyes off her for a moment and looks back at me. Both of us share a smile, not sure how to react.

"The quest requires us to go into this floor's pantry. Lilly recommends that we don't do anything rash…"

The pantry is just what it sounds like: a place in the Dungeon where hungry monsters go to eat. Lilly mentions the dangers of this place and holds back a sigh as she watches Mikoto's demeanor with concern in her eyes. Lilly takes a moment to rummage through her backpack, making sure that we have plenty of items and that our camouflage cloaks are ready.

An uneasy smile still on my face, I check my equipment as well.

Weapons—the Hestia Knife and both blades forged from a red Minotaur Horn are all I've got with me; no shield or buckler. Mikoto and I gave all our backup daggers and blades to Lilly for safekeeping. I'm wearing the same armor as I did during the War Game, Pyonkichi, smooth and shiny thanks to Welf's recent repairs.

We finally made enough progress at home for Welf to fire up his forge for the first time. Since he didn't want any of us to go to the Dungeon underprepared, he worked really hard making new weapons and armor for all of us before coming down here.

"A redemption, huh? Didn't even know that existed."

Welf is walking right next to me in the middle of our formation, a greatsword at the ready over his shoulder.

Satisfied with this peaceful option, he flashes a grin.

"Yes. It might be hard to collect enough money, but…we can help her."

I look back at Mikoto, a smile growing on my face. Both of us are in high spirits.

We're going to save Haruhime—thoughts of her smile fill my mind as I take hold of one of my knives.

"Redemption costs three million…Just to be safe, having five million on hand would be a good idea."

"Ehh…That'll take forever."

"Then we better consider going deeper into the Dungeon."

Sharp eyes scanning the Dungeon for monsters, Lilly joins our conversation from the back of the line.

Welf suggests that we can make more money by going to the lower levels.

"Bell's Level Three, so we should be able to make it to level twenty, right?"

Welf turns his shoulders and flashes another grin to Lilly behind us.

It's generally accepted that Level 2 adventurers can safely work in the middle levels between the thirteenth and twenty-fourth floors. According to the Guild, Level 3 adventurers like me are allowed to venture into the lower levels that start on the twenty-fifth floor.

Lilly, who's become our party's strategist, shakes her head at Welf's proposal.

"Mr. Bell being Level Three makes no difference. The Dungeon can bear its fangs at any time. We could be wiped out without proper preparation on any floor."

She's not taking lightly her experience from the battle on the eighteenth floor. I doubt she'll change her opinion anytime soon.

Even if we should be able to reach the twenty-fourth floor on paper, there's always a risk in going deeper—there's a big difference between "information" and "experience."

She makes a good point…It'd be really dangerous to go down that far halfheartedly.

I understand wanting to make progress quickly, but this is an issue that can't be solved by just one person getting stronger. All of us, as a party, need to be fully prepared before pressing forward. Lyu told me a while back that only a balanced party can survive in the middle levels. One adventurer by themselves would be overwhelmed by numbers.

We have a goal, but it can't be rushed. I tell myself over and over not to get overconfident.

Now's the time to concentrate on the quest.

"—Be still."

Mikoto is quite a few meders ahead of us when she suddenly comes to a halt and tells us to stop.

Turning around, she looks past our formation and focuses on a spot behind us.

Lilly quickly adjusts her position in the formation…Just as Mikoto warned us, *WHOOSH!* Something pops up from a hole a little behind us.

A tigerlike monster with a body that's solid like a rock comes into the light.

"Liger fang…!"

"It must've come to this floor from below."

Lilly calmly explains the Irregular as the rest of our jaws drop in the face of a monster that shouldn't show up until level fifteen.

The beast must've just killed something, monster or otherwise, because its claws and fangs are dyed red with blood. Its thick fur standing on end, the monster roars right at us. It will take something longer than a knife to penetrate its armor-thick coat.

It looks just as aggressive as the Minotaur that came to the higher levels. Despite its bloodshot death stare, Welf glances over at Mikoto with admiration and says:

"A detection Skill—very useful."

"No, I can sense only monsters I've encountered before…and it also depends greatly on my clarity of mind. Please don't depend on it."

We told one another our Skills and Magic once we all became members of the same familia.

Mikoto fought against a liger fang on her way down to the eighteenth floor when she was looking for us before. She walks past me to face the beast that she felt coming, katana already raised into a defensive position.

"It's faster than a Minotaur! Stay alert!"

"Yes!"

Mikoto charges toward the roaring beast. Welf and I are close behind as even more monsters join the fray.

* * *

Violent echoes of adventurers engaged in combat with monsters rang out from far down the passageway.

A group of women cloaked in hooded robes were standing by in a room not too far away—each of the tan-skinned warriors held her weapon loosely in one hand.

"Progress?"

"Couldn't be better. One million valis was enough to lure them out. The Albella Trading Company told them to go to this pantry… They have to come through here."

Another tall and slender woman, an Amazon, approached the group. She went to their leader, whose eyes—Aisha's eyes—were flashing from deep beneath her hood.

Samira, her gray hair and face hidden beneath the rough fabric, smirked as she answered.

"Nice plan, having a trading company issue the quest for us. I had no idea that was an option."

"Those Albellas owe us in more ways than one…Lady Ishtar helped 'em out of a tight spot as well. They couldn't refuse us."

Aisha had a pretty good idea what transpired behind the scenes of this contract. Hooded robe swaying just above her knees, she made her way to the middle of the group.

Several hooded figures stood with their backs to a large steel container as if protecting it. Aisha walked past them and placed her hand on the cargo box that was big enough to fit a few people. Slipping her fingers into the handle, she opened the door.

"Haruhime, get ready."

One lone girl was sitting in the back corner of the cargo box.

Dressed in long, loose clothing—Far Eastern–style combat attire—she wore a helmet that had been heavily decorated with feathers. Her beautiful golden hair was braided and tied into a bun that was hidden along with her ears under the helmet. Even her bushy fox tail was completely concealed.

Every effort had been made to hide the fact that this girl was a renart. Her brilliant green eyes shifted toward Aisha.

"…Are we here to…abduct an adventurer?"

Her eyes shook softly as she spoke. Aisha's expression, however, didn't change.

"We are."

"Who, may I ask?"

"You don't need to know."

Aisha reached inside the container, grabbed the young girl's arm, and pulled her up. Then she leaned in so close that her lips grazed the feathers on Haruhime's helmet as she spoke.

"Same as always, got it?"

"…Yes."

Aisha's strong voice reverberated inside the steel box. Haruhime looked at her feet as she whispered her response. Satisfied, Aisha let go.

"Aisha, it's them!"

"…All right, all of you, into position. And stick to the plan."

One of the scouts had returned. Every one of the hooded women took proper grasp of their weapons the moment Aisha issued her orders.

◆

"—That sound."

We'd fought our way through many groups of monsters and made a great deal of progress into the Dungeon.

Suddenly, the sound of running footsteps reaches my ears.

"Those screams, human and monsters…They're coming this way."

"Oh hell no, not again!"

Mikoto focuses her ears in that direction. Welf sounds really annoyed.

Judging by the echoes, I'd say that's a decent-size pack of monsters chasing after a party of adventurers at high speed. All are the telltale signs of a pass parade. All of us immediately tense up.

A party of hooded adventurers appears at the other end of the tunnel, a large group of the beasts nipping at their heels.

"From the front…They're coming out of the pantry?"

Lilly adjusts her backpack as she assesses the situation, eyes glued to the oncoming threat. Quickly closing all the pockets of her backpack, she lets her eyebrows sink as everyone prepares to make a break for it.

This tunnel is a long straightaway. There's no reason to risk being overrun by standing our ground. It's much safer to keep those hooded adventurers between us and the monsters.

"Back to the intersection!"

I give the order that everyone saw coming and we take off.

Adjusting our formation, we go back up the tunnel we came from.

I glance over my shoulder every few seconds, judging the distance between us and them. We make it into the intersection—but a heartbeat later…

Two more groups of adventurers, one from the left and one from the right, flood into the intersection with us in the middle.

"Two more?!"

Lilly's shrill voice pierces the air.

Pass parades are about to collide. All of us are stunned by this highly unlikely turn of events.

Monster roars and battle cries envelop us in a matter of moments. We're being overrun!

"UW-UWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

"E-EVERYONE!"

A whirlwind of chaos erupts in the intersection, with us trapped in the middle.

The hooded adventurers dip and dive out of the way, leading packs of angry hellhounds and almirage right to us. There are so many black shadows and bodies zipping in and out of sight that I lose track of Welf and Mikoto for a few seconds.

The only thing I can do is trust them and protect our supporter. Lilly needs me. I jump in front of her, hacking and slashing my way through waves of fangs and fur.

I'd forgotten one very important thing: the first pass parade. They've caught up.

"A third…?!"

The group slams into our battlefield from behind.

More screams, more roars, and even more fangs come flying at me. I slice an almirage at the last possible second. There's no room for error. Another flash—a monster has sunk its teeth into Lilly's backpack. Quickly dispatching it, I pull Lilly closer to me.

Monsters in every direction—I'm completely enclosed in a cage of claws and fangs. But it's what's on the outside of the cage that catches my attention. The three parties of adventurers come back into the intersection. Ignoring the monsters, they point their weapons at *us*.

"Who the hell are these guys?!"

CLASH! Welf uses his greatsword to block a scimitar sword. *WHAM!* Mikoto's katana collides with a club.

More and more of the hooded adventurers jump over the ring of monsters to attack. With a knife in each hand, I deflect the ones who come my way, protecting Lilly with all my might.

Another wave of monsters joins the fray. Flashes of steel and sharp claws relentlessly assail me from every direction.

This is far too organized to be a pass parade. These numbers, this location—all this means that they were after us all along.

"You're coming with us."

"Wha—"

A female voice sounds as a black shadow falls over me.

I look up and see a black robe slicing through the air and coming right toward me.

The sleeves of her loose, hooded robe make the woman look more like a bat, eyes flashing from beneath her hood.

That second of hesitation is all she needs to swipe at me from midair with a long, powerful leg.

"?!"

I manage to get my arms up to defend at the last possible moment, but the impact still sends me flying backward.

"Mr. Bell!"

My body arcs high over the monsters' heads. Lilly's voice reaches my ears, but she sounds…distant.

The power of that incredible kick propels me completely outside the cage of fangs.

No! Lilly, Welf, Mikoto!—They've got me isolated!

I can still see them inside the cage as I hit the ground and roll. The black robe gets closer with each rotation. *WHAM!* Another kick drives me farther back and around the corner.

I can't see anyone else!

"GWA—uhh…!"

I finally get my feet underneath me and try to stand. The black shadow comes flying around the corner…and removes her black robe.

"Aisha…?!"

"We meet again, and so soon."

She's got on tight, minimal purple clothing like a dancer's, long black hair, streamlined legs…and a massive blade at her side.

It's just her and me. There's no one else to witness the true form of an Amazonian warrior emerge from the black robe now at her feet.

"What is going on…?"

Rather than answering, she points her weapon right at my chest as the howls and echoes of battle rampage through the tunnel.

Her wooden weapon is very similar to Welf's greatsword.

The only real differences are the noticeably longer handle and the upward curve of the blade.

She's holding the weapon with her left hand, eyes glaring menacingly down at me from just behind the tip of the blade. Her mouth opens.

"You can direct your hate at the unpredictable whims of a goddess. That or—"

I hadn't calmed down enough yet to notice until now.

There's something weird going on with her dark skin—different spots all around her body *are sparkling.*

Now, why would…?

"—curse yourself for getting noticed!"

Aisha vanishes into thin air.

"?!"

Pieces of the Dungeon floor burst into the air where she stood. It takes a moment to realize Aisha's gone.

She's on top of me in the blink of an eye, that curved sword of hers on a direct course for my gut.

I thrust the Hestia Knife forward out of reflex and manage to safely guide the blade past my chest.

Aisha doesn't even wait for the sparks to clear from the collision to launch her first kick. It connects with the ferocity of a spear into the middle of my exposed chest.

My breastplate instantly cracks, breaking free from its restraints as the metal screams on impact. What was left of the armor flies off my body.

Too fast—!

Knocked off balance, I can catch only the flash of Aisha's next merciless kick already on its way.

I fall to my hands and knees before jumping back up to my feet. Knives still in both hands, I go on the offensive.

I fight back the confusion and chaos by focusing all my emotions into my blades and charge forward. The Amazon meets me head-on with unbelievable speed.

Arcs of dark-purple and crimson light shower her wooden blade, but nothing gets through. She counterattacks with those long legs, connecting time and time again with my armor and skin.

—She's faster than me!

That's not possible.

I know for a fact when I fought her three days ago in the Pleasure Quarter I had the advantage in speed.

My speed, my Agility, was higher, I'm sure of it!

It's been only a few days, so why?

"My Status ain't any different."

Aisha spins into another attack and practically reads my thoughts.

The palm of her hand flies right in front of my face. It was all a feint so she could get her heel above my head and slam it down into my shoulder.

I catch a glimpse of my beaten and damaged reflection in her eyes—she's wearing the same expression as Hyacinthus at the end of the War Game.

"Miss Mikoto, please follow Mr. Bell!"

"But—"

"I'll clear the way—move!"

Voices sounding similar to my friends' reach my ears from far away. However, I don't have time to process their meaning.

My sense of self is disappearing with each blow, focused down to a fine edge. A purple edge that manages to block an oncoming kick.

Throwing her leg out of the way, I swipe forward with Ushiwakamaru Nishiki.

"HAAH!!"

CLASH! My crimson knife connects with the flat side of her blade.

I see her grip loosen for a moment and focus all my strength onto that one point. The weapon spins from her grasp a moment later, flipping through the air.

She's disarmed. Her eyes jump open for a moment in surprise—but that's all.

Changing her strategy, Aisha grabs hold of me with both hands.

"?!"

Tremendous pressure encompasses my shoulders, each finger digging deep into my skin. One quick swipe at my feet to get me off balance again and she slams my back into the wall.

My bones crack on impact. Then Aisha starts to run *with me pinned against the rocky tunnel surface.*

"UGH—UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

BANG BANG BANG BANG!! Every bump in the wall slams into my back, my skin burning from the friction and waves of pain pounding through my body every second.

Aisha forces me even farther down the tunnel as pieces of the wall either explode away or embed themselves in my skin.

—This is insane!

I can't get away, can't block, can't defend.

This unbelievable strength—not just the power from her blows but the individual fingers on the verge of tearing my shoulders apart—doesn't add up.

It's not just her speed, it's her Strength, too.

She's in a completely different *class* from the other day.

Actually, this is more like—

—Level 4?!

The realization jolts through my body.

Everything shaking, the only thing I can see clearly is the look in Aisha's eyes. She's absolutely terrifying.

I hang on to my knives for dear life. Working up all the courage I have, I try to take a swipe at my unarmed opponent—silence.

"?!"

Sudden weightlessness. The shards of rock that were tearing my back to shreds are gone.

But the overwhelming force is still pushing me. That's when I realize what happened.

I was pushed down one of the many holes in the Dungeon walls on this floor.

Her fingers still digging deep into my flesh, the two of us tumble down the chute connecting to the floor below.

"~~~~~~?!"

She's not letting go. Down, down, down.

Drops of sweat pour off me as the air suddenly becomes even more humid. We rotate forward, falling headfirst.

I fight to catch my breath. The sparkles of light coming off her body are burning themselves into my memory.

Enchantment?!

That makes sense—for only a moment.

There was a chapter dealing with enchantments in one of those books that Eina drilled into my head. Enchantments with this much of an effect simply don't exist. At most, they can add fire or an electrical element to a weapon for a limited time, but nothing like this.

—Their members fought with strength well beyond that of their reported levels.

—Personally, I'm afraid of Ishtar Familia.

Eina's warning passes through my head, making my skin break out in goose bumps.

"GEH—UWWAAAHHHHHH!"

We emerge through the ceiling of the fifteenth floor. I grit my teeth and twist my shoulders, finally breaking her grip.

Kicking off of Aisha, I manage to get my body into a good position to take the fall at the last possible second.

The back of my shoulder hits first. The momentum sends me rolling down the tunnel, but I catch a glimpse of my opponent landing softly on her feet. I put my foot down and stop the roll as soon as there's a good distance between us.

"Haaah…haaah…!"

I've taken so much damage that even the feeling of air coming into my chest burns. Kneeling on the floor and clutching my ribs, I look up at Aisha. There isn't a single hint of emotion on her face.

Most of my armor's been destroyed and I dropped a knife somewhere around here. Aisha takes a few steps forward, an executioner bound to do her duty.

"Sir Bell!!"

A voice from above.

A surprised Aisha and I look back toward the hole in time to see Mikoto appear from the opening.

Her violet battle gear has been torn to shreds and bloody cuts cover her exposed skin. Katana flashing menacingly in her right hand, she lands with nary a sound.

"…How the hell did you know we were here?"

Mikoto doesn't answer Aisha's cold question. She does, however, charge.

My eyes fly open as I jump to my feet and do the same.

It's two-on-one, a pincer attack.

I don't care how cowardly it is. She has her back to me and I'm seizing the opportunity.

She's left me no choice. I have to end this, now.

"Samira's team lost track of a brat. How sloppy."

But it's useless.

Mumbling something about her allies upstairs, Aisha takes a defensive stance.

Her long right leg shoots out at Mikoto, forcing her to use her katana for defense before she can get in range. *SNAP!* Aisha's kick is so powerful it bursts through the guard and her foot connects with Mikoto's chest.

Shifting her balance, Aisha then spins like a top and comes at me with a roundhouse kick before I can get within striking distance. The specks of light all pulse as one, distracting me for a very valuable instant. I can't defend myself in time as her foot collides with the side of my face.

I fly backward as Mikoto rises. Unfortunately, Aisha sees that, too, and brings her leg high above her head before bringing down her heel.

"UGWAH!"

"GEH!"

Aisha's heel hitting just below her neck, Mikoto crumples to the ground. I land quite a ways behind them.

The Amazon dances her way out of our pincer attack, long black hair flowing gracefully behind her.

"M-Miss Mikoto…?!"

Her body is twisted into an awkward lump on the floor. She's not moving.

A graphic demonstration of the difference in their levels. I force myself to my feet and take a few steps toward her.

"Nahh. *That one's* already done."

Aisha looks back at me with ice-cold eyes. I was knocked clear back to an intersection; there's no way I can get to Mikoto in time.

A heartbeat later…

WHOOSH. A new dark shadow falls over me.

"

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A body standing over two meders tall. Stocky arms stretched out to the sides.

My instincts scream to run away, every nerve firing at once, but it isn’t nearly soon enough.

Even faster than Aisha, it prevents my escape with a fist the same size and power as a ballista—by slamming it into my back.

“GAHH!”

My body bends backward like a broken board, all the air forced out of my lungs on impact.

Pain blasting through my stomach like a wrecking ball, my feet leave the ground as my body goes airborne.

My vision gets fuzzy, but not fuzzy enough not to realize another boulder-size fist is coming right for my face. It opens at the last second and snatches my head out of the air.

“—GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH!”

Laughter like the croaking of an overgrown frog reaches my ears before what feeling I have left in my body tells me that I’m pinned against a wall.

My bones crack under the pressure. But it’s the Dungeon wall that gives way first, cracking and exploding into thousands of pieces around me. Showered in an avalanche of stone debris, my arms and legs go completely numb.

I can’t see anything but darkness with my eyes stuck between two gigantic fingers. Hopeless despair floods my mind and unimaginable pain jolts through my entire body.

“Ah…” Even my vocal cords have given out.

The hand moves away from my face and light hits my eyes.

The last thing I remember seeing is that woman’s horrifying smile.

Literally embedded in the wall, I lose consciousness.

* * *

“DAMN IT!”

A greatsword cleaved the final hellhound in two.

Corpses of countless monsters and piles of ash littered the hallway.

Slamming the greatsword into the floor and using it like a cane, a man wiped the sweat and blood out of his eyes as he looked around the area.

"Where the hell are they?!"

"Lilly has no idea! Mr. Bell and Miss Mikoto haven't come back…!"

Lilly responded to Welf's angry scream with a yell of her own.

The groups of hooded adventurers tormented the two of them to their heart's content before killing most of the monsters and disappearing without a trace. Welf and Lilly were now all alone in dead silence.

They fought off their confusion and anxiousness enough to begin searching for their lost allies. The badly injured human and prum were soon discovered by passing upper-class adventurers, and word of their plight spread.

"—It cannot be."

Elsewhere…

The screams of the victims were long silent.

Haruhime stared in disbelief at the people just beyond her feet.

A white-haired boy, battered and bloody, and the girl with long black hair covered in bruises and gashes, lay unconscious just in front of her.

"Master Cranell…Miss Mikoto."

Many Amazons worked quickly around her, preparing to return to the surface, as she sat in a state of shock.

"Why'd you have to pick up that little girly, Aishaaa? Our orders are to take the bunny home."

"She'd be in some monster's belly by now if I'd left her there. Wouldn't be able to sleep at night."

The monstrous Amazon Phryne and Aisha exchanged words.

Haruhime's lips trembled as she turned to address them.

"Lady Aisha…Were these people the targets for this mission?"

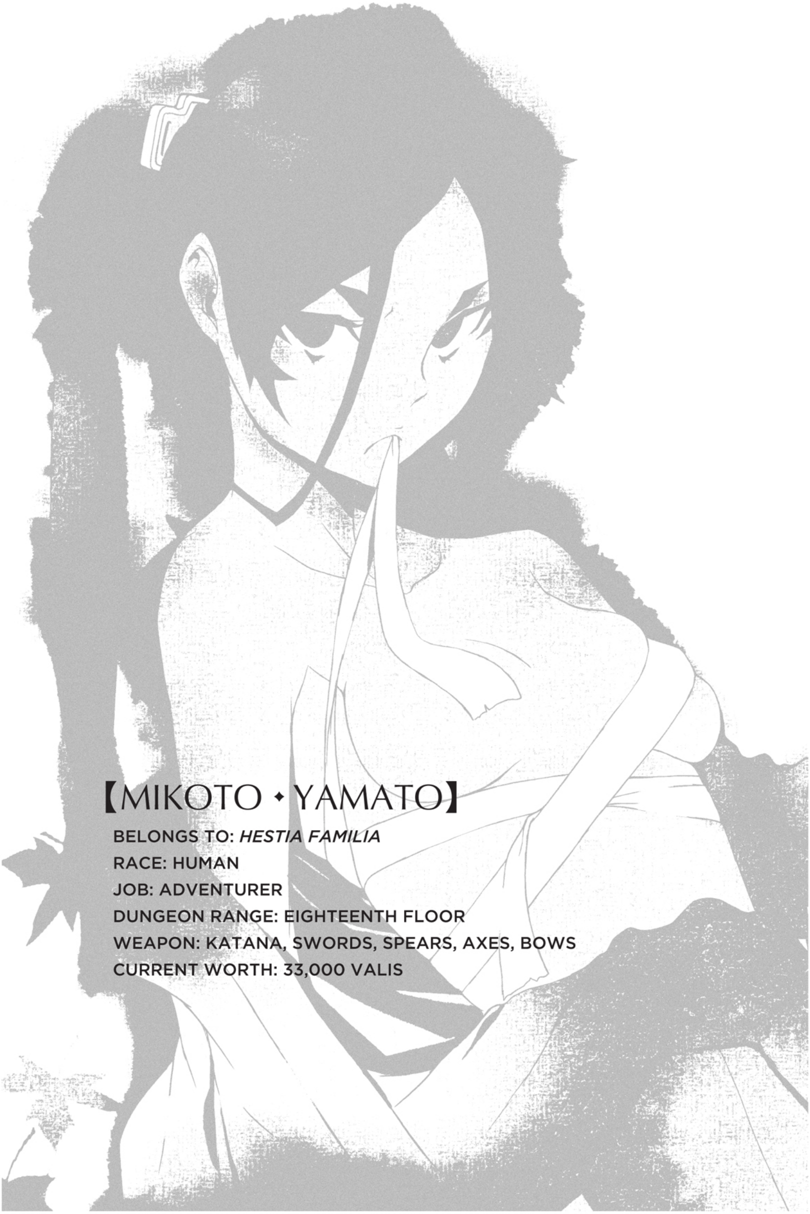
"…That's right. On Lady Ishtar's orders."

Every ounce of strength left the renart's body.

She watched in dismay as their bodies were loaded into the metallic cargo box behind her.

"Aahh……"

Pale as a ghost, Haruhime fell to her knees.



【MIKOTO ◆ YAMATO】

BELONGS TO: *HESTIA FAMILIA*
RACE: HUMAN
JOB: ADVENTURER
DUNGEON RANGE: EIGHTEENTH FLOOR
WEAPON: KATANA, SWORDS, SPEARS, AXES, BOWS
CURRENT WORTH: 33,000 VALIS

STATUS

Lv. 2

STRENGTH: H 113 **DEFENSE: I 98** **DEXTERITY: H 157**
AGILITY: H 140 **MAGIC: I 77** **IMMUNITY: I**

《MAGIC》

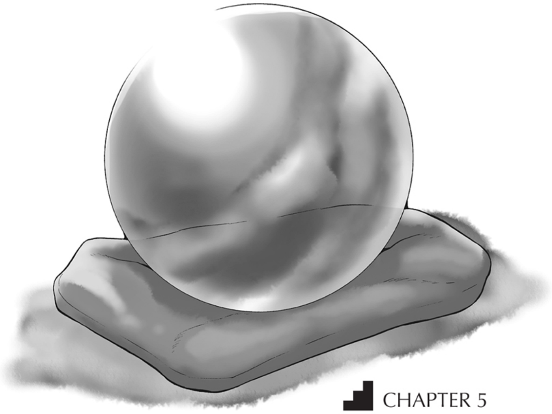
【FUTSU NO MITAMA】	• GRAVITY MAGIC • INCREASES GRAVITATIONAL FORCE WITHIN A CREATED BARRIER

《SKILL》

【YATANO BLACK CROW】	• DETECTS ENEMIES WITHIN A CERTAIN RANGE; CONCEALMENT HAS NO EFFECT • DETECTS ONLY PREVIOUSLY ENCOUNTERED MONSTERS • ACTIVE TRIGGER
【YATANO WHITE CROW】	• DETECTS ALLIES WITHIN A CERTAIN RANGE: CONCEALMENT HAS NO EFFECT • DETECTS ALLIES ONLY WITH THE SAME FALNA • ACTIVE TRIGGER

《ZENSETSU》

- KATANA. WHILE MIKOTO IS PROFICIENT IN MANY WEAPONS, THIS IS HER PREFERRED EQUIPMENT.
- FORGED BY LOWER-RANKING *HEPHAISTOS FAMILIA* SMITHS. PURCHASED BY MIKOTO ON THE EIGHTH FLOOR OF BABEL TOWER, AFTER HOURS OF SEARCHING, FOR 14,400 VALIS.
- A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE "SHINONOME," HER FAVORITE KATANA THAT WAS LOST IN THE GOLIATH BATTLE. MIKOTO WAS PLANNING TO USE THIS ONE AS A SUBSTITUTE UNTIL WELF FORGED A NEW BLADE, BUT IT WAS DESTROYED BY AISHA.



CHAPTER 5

KILLING STONE

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CHAPTER 5

KILLING STONE

Drip, drip.

I slowly blink open my eyes.

"…Ugh."

The sound of dripping water reaches my ears as my surroundings come into focus.

Pain. Pain from every corner of my body. Mustering strength in my neck, I lift my head for a better view.

The first thing I make out is a small magic-stone lamp.

But it's very dim in here.

And I think…the walls are made of stone. Not just the walls, the floor and ceiling, too. It's a decently wide room, but the air is chilly, humid.

My eyes begin to adjust and my brain starts to wake up then.

"…?!"

My last memories flash before my eyes.

In the Dungeon, an attack by hooded adventurers, a strangely strong Aisha, and—

A grotesque smile on a massive woman's face. My whole body shudders and I clench my eyes shut.

That's right, I was…!

"Captured…!"

Fully awake, my body springs to life. *Rattle, rattle.* But something holds me back. I whip around my head for a closer look.

My butt is on the cold stone floor and I'm sitting up against a wall. My arms…are tied above my head by silver chains. Surprise overtakes me, my eyes going wide. I try to break free, relying on my Strength to break the shackles—but it's no use. Not even a crack!

I pull a few more times, the heavy metallic chains rattling above my ears. But this is a waste of energy. There's no choice but to give up for now.

Taking quick, short breaths, I try to relax my shoulders.

"What the hell is going on…?"

My weak voice comes tumbling out. The attack came out of nowhere, and now this. Nothing makes any sense.

But I do know that Aisha was leading the attack, which means that it was *Ishtar Familia*. I don't know what they were trying to achieve, but…they captured me and brought me here…So this would be their home?

Lilly, Welf, Mikoto…Is everyone okay?

I'm in surprisingly good shape…

I take my eyes off my suspended hands and have another look at myself. My knives and armor are gone. My black undershirt is a complete mess, but the skin underneath looks healthy. Arms and legs, too, barely even a scratch.

Ah, that's why. Splashes of residue on my shirt prove that they practically showered me with potions at some point. The cold is sharp on my exposed skin.

Actually, my whole body feels pretty cold. I take a deep breath, collect my thoughts, and scan the room one more time.

The stone room feels old, like it was built a long time ago. No windows at all, and I'm pretty sure that's mold in the air.

The magic-stone lamp is built into the wall…and just below it are whips, chains, candles, a variety of handcuffs and restraints, and a spiked club…Other things, too, but actually thinking about them scares me half to death. There are even more of them on a table and in a pile in the corner.

And directly in front of me, barely recognizable in the dim light on the other side of the room—is a black iron grate.

"It's as though this were…"

An interrogation room.

I gulp down the air in my throat.

No one else is here, at least I don't think so…A wave of fear rushes through my body all the way to the tips of my toes.

I pull even harder at the chains, my heart anxiously pounding in my chest. I look left and right; the sound of footsteps reaches me.

"…!"

I hold my breath.

More droplets of water fall from the ceiling as the footsteps get louder, coming toward me. My heart slams against the inside of my ribs as my eyes lock onto the iron grate, dreading what I might see.

A large shadow appears on the other side. It shifts slightly from side to side, then, *creak*. The grate opens and the figure steps inside.

Every nerve in my body is pulsing, screaming at me to run. The figure's details come into view—

“

right?"

An animal person who had only recently come into Ishtar's service quietly voiced his opinion as he waved his fan back and forth. A dark-skinned human, Ishtar's preferred servant, Tammuz, was quick to respond.

"Do you not know?"

"Know what?"

"Phryne forces an enormous amount of aphrodisiac down the throat of any man she catches. That woman doesn't give a damn how much her victim cries. She'll take what she wants."

Tammuz finished by saying that she indulges until there is nothing left, only the empty shell of a man. The color drained from the young servant's face.

A cold chill ran through the other servants, causing them to shiver while wearing sour expressions.

"It still might let me take revenge on Freya somewhat…but it doesn't sit well with me."

Ishtar took a grape out of a bowl in a servant's outstretched hand and ground the juicy fruit between her teeth.

Licking her plump lips with her dark-pink tongue, Ishtar turned her gaze to her most trusted attendant.

"Tammuz, join the search."

"At once."

The handsome human made a curt bow before leaving the room.

The actions of one woman had unleashed utter confusion and disarray within their palace and the surrounding areas.

"…"

One girl stood alone amid the swirling madness.

Determination swelled within Haruhime's eyes.

One look down the corridor and she turned her attention to an iron grate just beside her. She could see an unconscious human girl lying on the floor just beyond the iron bars.

The guards had been called to search for Bell, leaving the prisoner unattended. Haruhime looked over her shoulder one more time to make sure she was alone. Then she tossed a bunch of keys into the chamber through the space between the bars.

"You have my deepest apologies."

She whispered under her breath into the chamber, but she was needed elsewhere.

Fox ears fully extended, she wasted no time in leaving the corridor.

* * *

Blood drains from my face as two bulging eyes loom over me.

“Welcome to my little *love chamber*.”

A voice so gruff it shakes me to my very core. Two short and stubby muscular arms are sticking out of red and black hunting gear. At least ten keys are dangling from a ring hanging from meaty fingers.

“And it’s all because Daedalus Street is so close. There’s a secret tunnel from home that leads out here.”

It still bears the name of the insane architect who designed it. Thanks to him, she can do whatever she wants in here.

Phryne takes a step closer, deep voice echoing around the room.

“This is where I bring all my favorite men. Bit annoying having to drag them all the way out here, but even Lady Ishtar doesn’t know about this place.”

My mouth goes dry at the knowledge that she’s the only one who knows about this room. Despair sets in; no one is going to save me.

I don’t even have to ask what she’s planning to do now.

I’m well aware—the “hunt” through the Pleasure Quarter was only four days ago!

Not good, not good, NOT GOOD!

I shuffle my feet backward in a desperate attempt to gain some distance, but my back hits the wall immediately. I’m stuck!

“Who would settle for sloppy seconds? You have to have the first bite, the first smell, to truly enjoy the feast! Ain’t that right?”

Her eyes narrow as her lips stretch from ear to ear in a menacing smile. “Ge-ge-ge-ge-ge-ge-geh!” Another round of croaking laughter.

Another step closer at her shadow falls over me—I can’t control the panic anymore.

“HYYE—HYYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

Even the clatter of the shackles can’t mask my pitiful scream! I thrash around, desperate for any kind of window to escape.

Pulling against the restraints in every direction, I try again and again. But the chains just won't break.

"Give up already. Those are forged mythril. Even top-class adventurers can't snap 'em."

Mythril is also very magically conductive. If I tried blasting it with Firebolt, the explosive reaction would tear my hands off at the wrist and send them flying. She gloats and tells me as much.

Phryne brings the ring of keys up to her face and jangles them in front of me. One of those pieces of metal can set me free. I watch in horror as she tosses the entire thing halfway across the room, landing with a metallic *clink* on the table. She grins at me and—leans in close to my face.

"Ahhh, deliciousss."

"

"…Haa?"

She looks at my legs.

More specifically, my…groin that seems to have shriveled up from fear.

"Tsk…That's the problem with brats. Can't be helped. Got a supply of love juice around here somewhere…"

She drops my shirt and stands up. Maybe she's lost interest? Stepping away, she looks down at me and says:

"Wait right there. I'll serve you like a bunny stew. Yeah, I'm gonna take real good care of youuu."

She starts laughing at what she no doubt considers to be a cute expression of terror on my face and disappears back into the darkness. I hear the iron grate slide shut and try again to break free.

"…I-I-I-I-I have to get out of here!"

The crackling of chains once again echoes throughout the room. My wrists are screaming in pain, pinched between the chains, but I don't care. Getting out of these things is a matter of life and death.

I'm on borrowed time as it is!

Then, with my whole body quivering like a trapped rabbit—*creak*.

"S-so soon?!"

The iron grate opens again.

Tears pouring down my face, I catch a glimpse of the human figure approaching through the darkness.

It's all over. The darkness of despair overtakes me. And the last things I see are two fox ears…and a golden bushy tail?

Light fills my vision once again, my eyes flying open. The thin figure is clearly wearing a kimono.

"Are you hurt, Master Cranell?"

She sounds out of breath but rushes to my side.

"MI-MISS HARUHIMEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE?!"

"Shh, shhh, shhh. Be still, Master Cranell."

Tears of joy erupt from my eyes as my voice roars from deep within my throat. Startled, Haruhime places two fingers over my lips.

But I can't hear a word she says.

It's a goddess! A goddess has arrived!

A goddess from the Far East is here right now!

I've been saved from the brink of despair. Haruhime quickly inspects the shackles binding my wrists before looking around the room. She spots the ring of keys that Phryne left on the table and grabs them without a second thought.

She's back at my side in an instant, trying key after key in the lock just above my hands.

"You are free."

CLICK. The mythril shackles release their grip.

Blood comes rushing back into my limbs as they fall to the floor. A new wave of tears flows out of my eyes, but this time they're tears of joy at my newfound freedom.

I jump toward the girl in front of me.

"UWAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"EEKK!"

I wrapped my arms around her.

She can't keep her balance as I bury my head in her chest, and she falls backward.

There isn't a calm nerve in me. Every muscle, every fiber, every cell is rejoicing after being released from the most unyielding fear I've ever experienced. I clutch her close as I can, my face diving into her chest like a traumatized kid reunited with his mother.

I was scared, so scared.

She's so warm and soft, I can't help but nuzzle my face into her over and over again.

"Miss Haruuuuuhimeeee…!"

I finally raise my head. Seeing my face with tears running freely, her own cheeks redden.

Then she sits up, pulling my head back into her chest and embracing me with both arms. "It's okay now," she says softly as she runs her fingers through my hair. Shifting her balance, she brings up her tail and wraps it around my waist.

A rabbit seeking refuge finds comfort from a lone fox.

"W-well, Master Cranell. We should leave at once."

"Uhnnhg!"

She blushes again and pushes my shoulders up and away. Climbing to her feet, she grabs hold of my hand.

I wipe away the tears with my right hand, and she pulls me to my feet as if she was a friendly neighborhood girl consoling a lost child.

I must look absolutely pitiful right now. Luckily, it's dark in the interrogation room. We pass through the iron grate and into the even dimmer hallway.

"S-s-sorry, Miss Haruhime…"

"I-it's nothing…Please pay it no mind."

She leads me past more magic-stone lamps.

I've finally calmed down enough from the explosion of euphoria to realize what I'd done and apologize to her.

Only then do I notice she's still holding my hand. Her cheeks blush pink and she lets go.

"But…how did you know where I was?"

I'm extremely grateful, grateful beyond words, for what she's done for me. But considering what Phryne told me, it's a little strange.

If her goddess didn't know the location of the room, how did Haruhime find me in time?

I turn my red eyes—they're red to begin with, but not like this—onto Haruhime.

"The truth is, I have witnessed Lady Phryne use this passage in the past."

We keep walking as she tells me about the time she saw the Amazon sneaking away.

"I was found out and threatened. That is why I've never said a word to anyone before…"

"So…that would mean that…"

If she hadn't told anyone about this passage, then Phryne knew that only Haruhime knows about it. Haruhime's put herself in a very dangerous position to help me.

She reads the look of concern on my face but only smiles.

"There is no need…to worry about me."

It's the same smile as before, empty and distant. There's nothing I can say.

Lost in my own thoughts, I follow Haruhime out of the passage.

"……Huh?"

Muscles in Phryne's body twitched as she surveyed the scene with a jug of aphrodisiac in her hand.

An open lock was sitting on top of the pile of mythril chains on the floor. The white rabbit was nowhere to be seen.

Phryne's face warped into a mask of rage as she looked at what remained of her prize.

"The only other one who knowsss…"

The pupils of her eyes shrank as they locked in on one long strand of golden hair.

“—HARUHIMEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

A thunderous roar erupted, her rage rocking the entire chamber.

◆

At the end of South Main Street, there was a building that stood out from all others in the Shopping District.

It was a solemn palace that had the air of an old temple, surrounded by a spacious lawn and high walls on all sides. Controlling this amount of space in the Shopping District spoke volumes about the wealth and power of its owner.

It stood proudly in Orario’s fifth district, sandwiched between South Main and Southeast Main. This commanding structure was the polar opposite of *Loki Familia*’s home, Twilight Manor, in the north. Its name: Folkvangr.

However, everyone knew it as the home of the most powerful familia in Orario:

Freya Familia.

“Lady Freya. *Ishtar Familia* is behaving strangely.”

The highest level of the palace was coated in silver and designed to resemble the moon. Freya sat at the very back of an open chamber, her overwhelming presence filling the room as her eyes found the speaker. One of her followers, a young human girl, made her way across the room with haste before kneeling in front of her goddess.

“Details?”

“A large number of prostitutes are running around their home, as well as the Pleasure Quarter.”

“Tell me…are Allen and his team watching them?”

“Yes, My Lady. Ottar has taken up position on Daedalus Street. Allen and Grale have infiltrated the Pleasure Quarter.”

“I see. You may leave…Thank you, Helen.”

The human had come to deliver the message in place of Freya’s favorite, Ottar. She thanked the girl and lovingly ran her fingers through the human’s long hair.

The girl trembled, overwhelmed by a compliment she’d never expected to receive. Coming back to her senses, she thrust her head close to the floor, claiming she wasn't worthy of such praise. Hiding her blushing face behind her hair, she left the room as quickly as she had arrived.

Freya watched her go for a moment before looking skyward.

The window far above her head showed the western skyline.

"…"

He was looking out the window on the top floor of the brothel at the same moment that Freya received the message.

It was still early afternoon and yet he could see groups of prostitutes walking up and down the streets in groups of two or three. A long, thin tail lazily swished back and forth as he watched them through narrow eyes. Each of the prostitutes looked nervous, their heads on swivels as if desperately searching for something.

He was a catman, standing only about 160 celch tall and covered in sleek black and gray fur.

Looking away from the streets, his gaze fell on a palace in the distance.

"Allen!"

Hurried footsteps echoed through the hallway before a beautiful prostitute arrived at his door.

The catman, Allen Fromel, slowly turned away from the window to face her.

"The Little Rookie was taken to our home after all. But now he's missing and everyone's out looking for him."

She was a very attractive human woman who shared his stature that was mismatched with her ample figure.

She was also a noncombatant belonging to *Ishtar Familia*.

She gave the man information that only the familia's adventurers and commanders knew.

"Captured by a bunch of prostitutes…Worthless rabbit."

Cat people were generally known for their gentle appearance and friendliness. However, Allen's rough words and tone betrayed that reputation.

He clicked his tongue, black eyes flashing in disgust.

"Allen, I've done everything you've asked. This was enough to become your woman, right?"

Her cheeks blushed bright pink, eyes moist as she stepped closer to the man.

She came within arm's reach of the catman.

While she didn't try to reach out, she had put herself in great danger to fulfill his wishes. She'd betrayed her own familia for the man she loved.

Opening her shoulders to him, the longing in her eyes was palpable. However, Allen took one glance at her before pushing her away.

"Don't touch me, slut. You'll dirty my goddess's favor."

She stumbled backward. Allen's harsh rejection put her in a state of shock.

"As if I'd take a liking to one of you. You're a common whore, consumed by lust."

He looked at the woman's exposed cleavage with the same disdain as rotting flesh before making eye contact.

Becoming the preferred companion of an upper-class adventurer, or becoming his woman, was the goal of every prostitute in Orario. A connection with the right person or familia would give her more power within their world.

All of them were desperate for an influential patron to back them.

They all held dreams of becoming a queen of the night.

Allen knew she was one of them and coldly spat out his next words, saying that a parasite that would give herself to any man for the right price was unworthy of his affection.

"Monster…I-I loved you."

A different type of tears leaked out of her eyes the moment she realized she had been used.

Allen took his eyes off her and stepped past her quivering shoulders.

He was almost out the door when the prostitute spun around with fury in her eyes.

"You ungrateful bastard!"

Her voice shrieked as her hands fumbled around in search of anything not attached to the floor.

She hurled pillows, random objects, and insults at him—Allen dodged them all without so much as a peek over his shoulder. Then he reached to his waist, withdrew a dagger, spun, and pressed the blade to her throat in less than a second.

"—Ah."

"Shut it."

Her rage was frozen by terror, lungs refusing to breathe.

The blade hovered just above her skin. Luckily, she fell backward onto the floor. Allen flipped the weapon in his grip before returning it to its sheath. He turned his back once again and walked toward the door.

The girl sat on the floor, her head in her trembling hands. "So…cruel…" she said weakly. Allen didn't respond as he took a small pouch of coins off his belt and tossed it in her general direction.

Leaving behind the crumpled mess of a woman, Allen left a room to which he would never return.

"…"

The catman exited the brothel without a sound, heading for the rooftop.

Once there, he spotted several other shadows standing over the red-light district and other brothels.

They belonged to an elf, a dark elf, and four prums who looked similar enough to be quadruplets.

Then Allen turned his attention back to the streets of the Pleasure Quarter, his team watching their every move.

* * *

She awakened to the sound of hundreds of hurried footsteps.

"Uhh…"

Mikoto groaned softly as her eyes slowly blinked open.

"Where am I…?"

She suddenly realized her arms and legs were bound when she tried to get off the floor. Her eyes quickly glanced up to her hands and down to her feet. Both sets of limbs were restrained by silver shackles.

"It cannot be…In the Dungeon, I was captured?"

Attacked by mysterious adventurers, practically forced by Lilly and Welf to pursue Bell, nailed by a tall Amazon's counterattack—memories flooded her mind as twinges of pain flashed throughout her body. Mikoto started connecting the dots.

"Sir Bell…?!"

The identity of her attackers was still a mystery, but she was fairly certain that Bell had been their target. The fact that they had used such a violent method to capture him filled her with dread and foreboding.

She might be trapped, defenseless in a dark room, but…The speed and unusual rhythm of the footsteps outside the door let her know something was amiss. There was panic in the air. Mikoto's eyebrows sank as she focused on the sounds.

"The rabbit and Phryne…Can't find…Lady Ishtar's order…"

Ears empowered by her Status, Mikoto managed to pick up valuable pieces of information.

First off, the attackers belonged to *Ishtar Familia*, which meant that this was most likely their home. Second, that there was a high probability that Bell had been captured like her but had somehow escaped. However, she couldn't confirm any of that just yet.

Mikoto knew it was too early to relax, but the knowledge that Bell was still alive made her breathe a sigh of relief.

The new information helped her regain a small sense of calm.

"Be that as it may…something must be done about these shackles."

Mikoto's gaze locked onto the chains that bound her. A quick pull was enough to let her know she couldn't break free on strength alone. So she lifted her head and scanned the room for any kind of tool that could assist her. It wasn't long before—

"…Keys?"

She spotted a ring full of keys lying on the ground just in front of the tightly shut iron door.

Shocked by this stroke of luck, Mikoto slithered her body toward them. Under the faint light of the door's barred window, she grabbed hold of them and maneuvered the top key into the lock just under her left wrist and, with great difficulty, thrust it inside. *Click.*

The shackles instantly popped open and her arms and legs were free. Mikoto sat up and stared down at the open lock on the floor.

"…Lady Haruhime?"

Mikoto immediately thought of the renart who belonged to *Ishtar Familia*. There was no proof, but there wasn't a shadow of doubt in her mind.

It was the kind girl who gave her a means to escape.

"I am in your debt…Lady Haruhime."

Feeling a smile growing on her cheeks, the now free Mikoto climbed to her feet.

She needed a plan.

Reuniting with Sir Bell takes priority, then our escape…Other objectives: acquiring weapons would be useful.

She was completely unarmed. Her once proud violet battle clothes were nothing more than tatters around her body.

While finding weapons was high on her list, her appearance bordered on the obscene. Wearing the equivalent of bloody rags that revealed so much of her bruised yet silky white skin, Mikoto was one step away from resembling those debauched ladies.

Covering her body as well as she could with her thin arms, Mikoto started scanning the room once again.

There was a dark magic-stone lamp above her head. From what she could see, Mikoto figured out that she had been locked in some kind of large storage room. Of course there weren't any weapons in here, but there were closets full of clothing used by the prostitutes and drawer upon drawer of their accessories and goods. "My apologies," she whispered to the closets before throwing open each of them and searching from end to end until she found what she sought.

It went without saying that the first articles of clothing she found were very suitable—for the Pleasure Quarter. However, it didn't take her long to stumble across outfits worn in the red-light district.

Mikoto ran her fingers down the sleeve of a kimono from her hometown and pulled it out without any hesitation. Considering her only other options were Amazonian garb that amounted to little more than lingerie, it was an easy choice.

Blushing in the darkness, she quickly removed the remains of her battle-cloth armor and donned a short-sleeve, thigh-length robe over the long strand of cloth she had wrapped around her chest. She finished the ensemble with a matching skirt.

"This is to be expected…"

The fabric of the shin-length skirt and the top of the kimono rustled every time she moved. It felt cheap and itchy against her skin.

Deciding it was much better than the alternative, she ignored the strange tugging of her new clothes and set out in earnest.

There was only one way in or out of the large chamber, the iron door. Mikoto cautiously approached it and peered out the window.

She saw groups of two or three people rushing past the door, but no one was stationed outside. Then she found the lock on the inside of the metallic barrier and used the same set of keys to release it. She didn’t linger. A quick check up and down the hall, and she left the storage room without a sound.

Her nose picked up a faint trace of musk in the air as she disappeared down the palace’s hallway before anyone else arrived.

Mikoto started her search of the expansive structure.

“Hey, find ’em?”

“!”

The moment that she heard a voice or felt anyone’s presence, Mikoto dove around the closest corner or hid in the shadows out of sight.

Able to conceal her breathing and slow her heart rate to a crawl, she watched noncombatant prostitutes and even the fearsome Berbera walk right past her many times without noticing a thing.

I am not much of a ninja, however…

Takemikazuchi had trained her in many styles of combat even before leaving their homeland. Ninjutsu was one of them.

She had mixed feelings about these techniques of espionage being useful as she dropped down from the ceiling and landed silently on the floor after another group passed beneath her.

Stealth, walking on tiptoe, silent motion. Deftly avoiding the attention of sprinting Amazons and her current attire were very fitting of the name *ninja*.

“…Now is as good a time as any.”

Mikoto found stairs going up and down—and activated her Skill.

—Yatano White Crow.

At this time, Mikoto had two Skills at her disposal.

The first, Yatano Black Crow—a Skill that allowed her to sense the presence of a monster she had already received excelia from in the past. While it wasn’t perfect, this Skill protected her from most monster ambushes and sneak attacks.

The second, Yatano White Crow.

The complete opposite of the former, Yatano White Crow gave Mikoto the ability to sense her allies.

…Sir Bell doesn’t appear to be on this floor.

This Skill detects only those with the same ichor as her own—others who have received a Status from the same god.

Meaning she could easily find members of her own familia.

Even if she were lost in the deepest tunnels of the Dungeon, Yatano White Crow could guide her back to the rest of her party by giving her a mental picture of their location.

She'd used this Skill to follow Bell during the ambush.

Even at full strength, thirty meders might be my limit right now…

The range of Mikoto's two Skills varied, based on her Status and condition.

Also, activating them drained her Mind. Therefore, she chose a direction after using Yatano White Crow for a few seconds and then traveled to the edge of its range before activating it again. This strategy helped her to avoid constant strain on her magical energy.

"…?"

Avoiding the eyes of passing prostitutes, Mikoto made her way down to the lower levels of the building.

That was when she felt it: a presence just within range.

"Sir Bell? No, but what is this strange sensation…?"

It was the presence of an ally she'd never felt before.

Putting aside her confusion, she set off to find it.

Mikoto traversed several hallways and descended even more sets of stairs until she found a room tucked away in the corner of a dark floor.

"A vault…?"

Circumstances were in her favor: no guards, and she already had a fully loaded ring of keys. Making sure she was alone, Mikoto found the correct key, opened the door, and slipped inside. Her eyes were greeted by weapons of every size and shape, potent items, and piles of jewels. Vast shelves lined the walls in each direction. A large bag in the back corner of the room glinted with the sheen of thousands of valis in the dim light.

Her surprise was apparent as she made her way deeper into the vault…and located the strange "presence" on a table next to a set of golden scales.

"This is…Sir Bell's."

Mikoto reached out and grabbed the black sheath of the Hestia Knife.

Only when her palm touched its handle did hieroglyphs respond to her Falna by glowing purple all the way down the weapon.

"Lady Hestia's knife…So that's why."

The value and origin of this weapon had caused quite a stir on their recruiting day. That had been her first clue.

This weapon, specially made for Bell, shared the same Blessing and ichor as her own and was responding to her touch with a violet glow.

It was *alive* and indeed one of her allies. Mikoto smiled as she basked in its light.

"I should collect Sir Bell's other weapons as well…"

It didn't take her long to spot both Ushiwakamaru and Ushiwakamaru-Nishiki lying on the same table.

Mikoto reasoned that after they were captured and stripped of their equipment, their attackers planned to sell anything valuable—particularly the knife branded with the Hephaistos logo—and put them here for safekeeping.

Collecting all three knives as well as Bell's belt, item pouch, and leg holster still filled with potions, Mikoto strapped everything to her body.

Then she took another look around the vault. Excuse after excuse for what she was about to do escaped her lips as she approached one of the shelving units filled with items.

She drank two potions: one to heal her remaining physical injuries and the other to restore her Mind. Lastly, she filled the empty spaces in the leg holsters with as many high potions as she could.

Mikoto found a vast array of flash grenades and smoke bombs a little farther down the same shelf. Wanting to be as prepared as possible, she filled Bell's item pouch right to the top.

"Haa…These are the actions of nothing less than a coarse burglar…"

While feeling genuinely sorry, she didn't stay her hand.

Mikoto had come to fully understand how difficult it would be to escape from *Ishtar Familia's* home. No matter how well-equipped she was, a fierce battle could be waiting for her at every turn.

Her tear-filled deep-purple eyes passed over so many things that she immediately thought of Lilly, who would gladly load them into a backpack without a second thought.

"No reason…to stay long."

Another round of hurried footsteps echoed from the other side of the vault's iron door.

While there weren't any windows, Mikoto caught a glimpse of air ducts just above her head. Using the shelf as a handhold, Mikoto jumped right for it. *WHAM!* Both her feet slammed into the small iron grate and broke it in two.

Another quick jump and twist, and the human disappeared into the vent without a trace.

* * *

"The girl escaped?!"

Aisha, who already had her hands full tracking down the whereabouts of Bell and Phryne, turned to face an extremely nervous messenger.

"How could that happen? The hell were you doing?"

"Y-y-you see, I left to search for Phryne and, well…I was careless, sorry."

The young, long-haired Amazon who'd been in charge of keeping an eye on the storage room let her head droop in shame.

Aisha sighed as all the other Berbera raced around them.

"Hold it, Rena. The girl was bound by mythril, was she not? The Eternal Shadow is only Level Two. Would be impossible for her to break free."

"Th-that's what I thought! She couldn't go anywhere!"

The young Amazon's anger and frustration flared up for a moment but then dissipated as she continued.

"But they're completely intact…And also, the keys were missing from the hook, the one that released the shackles."

Aisha considered for a moment that the escaped "rabbit" might have set the girl free…But then the look on the renart's face after they'd captured Bell and Mikoto in the Dungeon earlier that day flashed through the back of her mind.

"…Haruhime—where is she?"

The young Amazon was caught off guard for a moment and stopped to think. Her head tilted to the side briefly before she said:

"She said something about purifying herself for the ritual, but…she wasn't in her room last I checked."

Aisha frowned, realizing what just happened.

* * *

"Um, Miss Haruhime?"

Our footsteps echo through the dark passageway.

I'm pretty sure it's been at least twenty minutes since we escaped from Phryne's room.

Haruhime and I have been traveling through these secret underground tunnels since then.

I think we're headed in the opposite direction of *Ishtar Familia*'s home…but we've doubled back a few times and gone through so many intersections that honestly I have no idea which direction we're going. Although, I can tell that these paths are connected to many different places in the Pleasure Quarter.

It seems like Haruhime, who isn't allowed to leave the brothel area, really does come down here from time to time—in the early morning hours when the Night District is asleep—through a passageway that connects with the red-light district. She told me we were going to the most secluded exit, but that feels like forever ago.

Daedalus Street's architect…It's said that his insanity went into the design of the district that bears his name. Who would've guessed he included secret passages to the Pleasure Quarter?

The thought that one man could design and build something as complex and expansive as these tunnels makes me shudder.

"What troubles you, Master Cranell?"

The slowly swishing golden tail I've been following comes to a stop as Haruhime looks over her shoulder at me.

"Is this…really okay? Letting me get away."

Looking back on Aisha's methods and tone in the Dungeon, I have every reason to believe that it was Lady Ishtar who ordered them to capture me.

The will of the god is the will of the follower. Going against that to rescue me will put Haruhime in a very tough spot.

She told me about Mikoto as well—we can't do anything with a top-class adventurer like Phryne lurking down here, though—but I can't help but be more concerned for the person in front of me.

"Please pay it no mind, Master Cranell."

Haruhime smiles back at me, completely ignoring my unease.

She stops walking and turns to face me. Her silky golden hair flows like water around a river bend as her green eyes meet mine.

"It is my final desire. There is no doubt that Lady Aisha and the others will turn a blind eye."

Her tone sounds like a mother trying to comfort a child, her smile soft and gentle. And yet, something seems off.

Could it be my imagination?

Then there was her choice of words: *final desire*…What did she mean by that?

I have no idea what this strange tingling is in the back of my mind, but I shove it aside and try to liven up the mood.

“Oh yeah, Miss Haruhime! Actually, we’re going to give you a redemption!”

I tell her all about what we decided as a familia.

A smile grows on my lips as I excitedly say that she won’t have to be a prostitute anymore. If this topic doesn’t change the atmosphere down here, I don’t know what will.

“Eh…?”

Haruhime’s green eyes widen.

She looks confused, so I explain again.

“Miss Mikoto already convinced our goddess to help you! It might take us a little while to get enough money, but…”

I wanted to make her happy.

Not some fleeting happiness, but beaming joy that would come from the bottom of her heart.

“Our goddess and everyone in my familia wants to help you, Miss Haruhime!”

I didn’t want to see that aloof smile.

I was hoping for the childish one, that blissful expression she wore when we talked about heroes and their adventures.

“Miss Mikoto…and *I* want to help you!”

I want to see that smile again, just like Mikoto.

I want only to laugh with her, joining hands and forgetting our problems for a few jubilant moments.

“It cannot be so…”

But Haruhime…

…quietly sheds a tear.

“…Miss Haruhime?”

Shiny streams of tears roll down both cheeks, her green eyes wide open.

My words leave me as I see her standing there, looking at me as if lost in time.

“Aah…”

Haruhime presses both her hands against her chest and releases a sigh completely devoid of emotion.

Slowly closing her eyes, a fresh tear rolling down her cheek, she says:

"I…Haruhime, am truly grateful."

Her delicate lips arc upward.

"To receive such words from you…From Miss Mikoto."

Her upper body quivers as she takes a deep breath. She might have fallen to pieces if both her hands weren't clutching her chest.

"…I have no regrets."

The green orbs of her eyes come into view, glistening in the dim light as she smiles at me once again.

"……"

Tears of joy?

Really?

If I didn't know better…I'd think she was saying a final farewell.

"Thank you, Master Cranell. Let us be on our way."

With that, she turns her back to me and faces forward.

I can't say anything to her back, only try to keep up.

Try to follow that golden tail as it slowly disappears deeper into the darkness, desperately try.

This doesn't feel right.

I can sense it in my chest.

◆

In a different building.

An imposing stone structure that stood wider than it was tall was decorated to stand out from the other buildings in the area.

Inside the main hallway, *tap, tap*. A white scarf swished back and forth as a woman stomped her way through the main hall.

"Lulune, where's Lord Hermes?"

"In the back."

The woman looked through her silver-framed glasses at a chienthrope girl sprawled out on a sofa. The young lady simply jerked her thumb down the hall in response. The slap of her golden-winged sandals on the stone floor echoing through the hallway once again, the woman took off a little bit faster.

As soon as she arrived in front of the room, the woman, Asfi Al Andromeda, rapped on the wooden door with all her burning rage before throwing it open.

"Lord Hermes!"

Every celch of the walls inside the room was covered with maps.

Some showed every road that snaked across the known world, others were treasure maps and ciphers, and even oceanic diagrams, all of them completely hiding the stone walls. Most of the maps were hand-drawn on paper and had little red *X*s and arrows detailing future travel plans.

He was in the room, completely surrounded by the intimidating atlas of the world. The person in question was in the middle of a game of chess against himself. The board was on his desk, decorated with gadgets and doodads collected from around the globe. Hours' worth of sand poured from the top half of a large hourglass to the bottom at his side.

Completely caught off guard by the rather violent entrance of his follower, Hermes practically fell out of his chair in surprise.

"You went to the Pleasure Quarter by yourself a few days ago, yes? Without—an—escort."

"H-h-how did you know?! Hold on, Asfi, I didn't do anything with them, I swear…!"

Hermes immediately threw up his hands and claimed innocence, but Asfi's interrogation had begun.

WHAM! The woman slammed both her hands onto his desk and leaned right up into his face, her eyes burning with fury.

"So you took the hard-earned money we obtained by putting our lives on the line to play with women?! What an upstanding quality of character you have, Lord Hermes, what kind of deity are you I forgot that you're this kind of god, if only you were just a little bit more aware of your position as our god, how much pain and suffering would it spare us—what's more, it's already morning, how sloppy can you be?!"

In general, gods and goddesses had full control over the happenings of their familias, including who got the final say. Hermes, however, shrank in fear from the pulsing red face of his angry follower.

"C-calm down now, Asfi! I went there, but it was to finish a delivery…!"

"Delivery?"

Hermes finally found an opening to explain himself to the woman who was haranguing him like an angry wife giving a cheating husband a piece of her mind.

Asfi fell silent and locked eyes with her god. Her glare exuded extreme pressure, but she allowed him a chance to explain himself. Hermes cleared his throat.

"The truth is—"

"Is it true Mikoto's been captured?!"

The living room door flew open with a bang as the god Takemikazuchi and his familia rushed inside.

The expressions of Ouka, Chigusa, and the remaining three members darkened the moment they saw a heavily damaged greatsword and what was left of an oversize backpack sitting in the corner and their battered and bloody owners, Lilly and Welf, sitting on the sofa. Every single one of them feared the worst.

"Yes, it's true. She was taken, along with Bell, in the Dungeon… I'm sorry, Také."

Hestia finished wrapping Welf's arm in a bandage before looking up and answering the deity's question.

The rest of *Takemikazuchi Familia* filed into the center of the room and took a seat.

"Do you know the identity of their attackers?"

"They wore long robes that hid their faces, but…Lilly could tell. Every one of them was an Amazon."

"Damn strong ones, too. Couldn't do jack shit against 'em. With strength and speed like that, it had to be Berbera."

"*Ishtar Familia…*"

Lilly was the first to respond to Ouka's question, her voice weak. Welf's answer followed, his words laced with frustration. Lastly, it was Chigusa who quietly voiced the conclusion everyone else was reaching.

A quiet chill filled the room at the mention of that familia.

"But why would Ishtar go after Mikoto and Bell? Any ideas, Hestia?"

"Hmm, there was a rather eventful night in the Pleasure Quarter a few days ago…but nothing that would lead to this."

Takemikazuchi turned to Hestia, hoping for any kind of lead. However, the goddess only growled and crossed her arms.

His next question was whether or not she had informed the Guild. She shook her head and said there was no proof. The Guild wouldn’t take action right away unless there was undeniable evidence of their actions. She had gone to the Guild after Bell had been chased through the Pleasure Quarter, but that had gotten her nowhere—apparently men getting chased by Amazons through the Pleasure Quarter was such a common occurrence that Guild employees shared those stories over lunch.

When it came to *Ishtar Familia*, the Guild had little to no power whatsoever. Even if they could levy a penalty against them with proper evidence, it would only slow them down.

This was the reason that the Goddess of Beauty could take such military action in the first place.

“Um, if I may…Could Lady Ishtar’s interest in Mr. Cranell be like what happened with *Apollo Familia*…?”

“It’s not out of the question…But Ishtar?”

“Bell really isn’t her type…”

Chigusa blushed as she worked up the courage to speak. She couldn’t help but remember the events that led to the War Game after listening to what happened with the Amazons. This time Takemikazuchi crossed his arms and Hestia tilted her head to the side as they answered.

Both deities knew something didn’t add up, but they couldn’t figure out what. The two of them glanced at each other.

“…Could this be related to the situation with Haruhime?”

A new voice, Ouka, broke the silence.

Mikoto had already informed *Takemikazuchi Familia* that their childhood friend was working as a prostitute and had brought them up to speed on the plan to free her with a redemption.

A hint of despair filled Chigusa’s eyes as her head drooped. The other three *Takemikazuchi Familia* members donned similar expressions.

Takemikazuchi sat up straight and closed his eyes.

“Everyone’s been saying she was just a low-ranking member, so it makes no sense that Ishtar would take action for that renart…”

Hestia mumbled as she brought her hand to her chin. Then suddenly, she remembered something important and turned back to her divine friend.

A piece of information she’d heard directly from Bell.

“Ishtar has something called a Killing Stone…”

“I-I understood going in, but this is tight…”

Mikoto made her way through the stone air ducts of *Ishtar Familia*'s home.

This same duct was how she escaped to the vault after sensing the approach of possible enemies—while she was safe from their sight above the ceiling, this air vent had about as much breathing space as a coffin.

Bending her shoulders and hips in an alternating rhythm, the girl crawled her way forward through the network of dusty, cobweb-riddled air ducts.

"…?"

She was about to activate her Skill once again when suddenly voices coming from below caught her attention.

"Sounds like Haruhime's gone."

"The Killing Stone Ritual is tonight, yeah…You don't think?!"

"She's plannin' to use the Little Rookie to escape?"

Mikoto twisted her body to place her ear as close as possible to the nearest iron grate. Crawling forward, she got close enough to it to see the hallway below.

Only catching a glimpse of the two Amazons as they walked by, she let her eyebrows sink as she replayed their conversation in her mind.

Killing Stone…?

This is bad. I need to find Haruhime, too, Mikoto thought as another set of Amazons came into view below her. Even more questions flooded her mind.

Just what was the Killing Stone Ritual, and what did it have to do with Haruhime? Wasn't she just a prostitute—in other words, a low-ranking noncombatant?

A gray shroud of dread began filling her heart as Mikoto continued crawling through the air duct.

According to the new voices beneath her, the Amazons had expanded their search to outside the familia's home. That meant the number of patrols inside would decrease. This was her opportunity to escape the compound. Her decision was made even easier when the air duct suddenly became even narrower than before. Mikoto backtracked to the nearest iron grate, removed it from its frame, and silently dropped into the room below.

"What is this place…?"

She was surrounded by a maze of shelves.

She quickly deduced from the amount of books and paperwork in the area that this was some kind of library or archive.

The scent of old wood and papyrus filled the dimly lit room.

Mikoto started working her way through the maze as quietly as possible, knowing that an exit had to be nearby. However, that's not what she saw first.

A desk littered with scrolls and paperwork blocked her path after she rounded a corner. What's more, there was no dust. Someone had been here very recently.

Mikoto leaned down to take a look at the sheets on top of the pile in the middle of the desk.

"…Killing Stone Ritual information."

She had to strain her eyes in the dim light to make out the characters at the top of the sheet. She almost gasped the moment they came into view.

She took a quick look around each corner before grabbing a lantern-style magic-stone lamp off a nearby shelf and turning it on. Placing it on top of the desk, she ran her finger over the many lines of Koine text before stumbling across a very important memo.

"'Once the Killing Stone has been delivered by *Hermes Familia*, the Berbera shall—'"

"—A Killing Stone?!"

Takemikazuchi grabbed both of Hestia's shoulders.

Hestia was so stunned by her good friend's sudden outburst and the desperate look in his eyes that she couldn't step back.

"Are you sure?! Are you absolutely sure—Ishtar has one in her possession?!"

"L-Lord Takemikazuchi!"

"Please calm down!"

Ouka was the first to step in front of the panicked deity. Lilly and Welf were close behind, stepping in front of Hestia as if to protect her.

"M-my…my apologies, Hestia."

"It's…it's okay. So what is it, Také? What's a Killing Stone?"

Free of his grasp, Hestia quickly changed her expression from bewilderment to urgency.

Takemikazuchi let Ouka push him back one more step before looking to the floor and gritting his teeth.

"The Killing Stone is an item that only renarts can use."

"*Sesshouseki*, also known as a Killing Stone…A forbidden magic item that is created by the synthesis of a *tamamo* stone and a *toba* stone."

There was an ominous air to Asfi's voice. Being an item maker, she knew exactly what it could do.

She continued to glare at Hermes as more and more details of his delivery came to light.

"You brought something like that directly into Lady Ishtar's hands—is that what you're saying?"

"I didn't know the cargo until I saw it for myself."

Hermes's shoulders sank into the back of his chair. The aura emanating from the woman on the other side of his desk was downright terrifying.

However, Asfi wasn't satisfied with her god's response and changed her tone from a blunt hammer into a sharp blade.

"And just where was it made, huh? How did they get the materi—"

Hermes didn't let his follower finish her question and jumped in halfway.

"Oh, you know. From the ashes of a renart."

"Making an item from the corpse of a child…Seriously?!"

Hestia shuddered as she heard an explanation of the *tamamo* stone.

Takemikazuchi nodded, his expression so heavy that wrinkles appeared around his mouth and eyes.

"Its original purpose was to boost a renart's magical power…An item to increase the effectiveness of their sorcery…"

The outlawed orb was created by desecrating graves of the deceased.

Ouka, Chigusa, and the others didn't know how to react and fell silent. Only Lilly was able to keep a cool head. She looked over at Takemikazuchi from her spot on the sofa.

"The other item, a *toba* stone…Would that be lunatic light?"

Takemikazuchi grunted an affirmation and nodded.

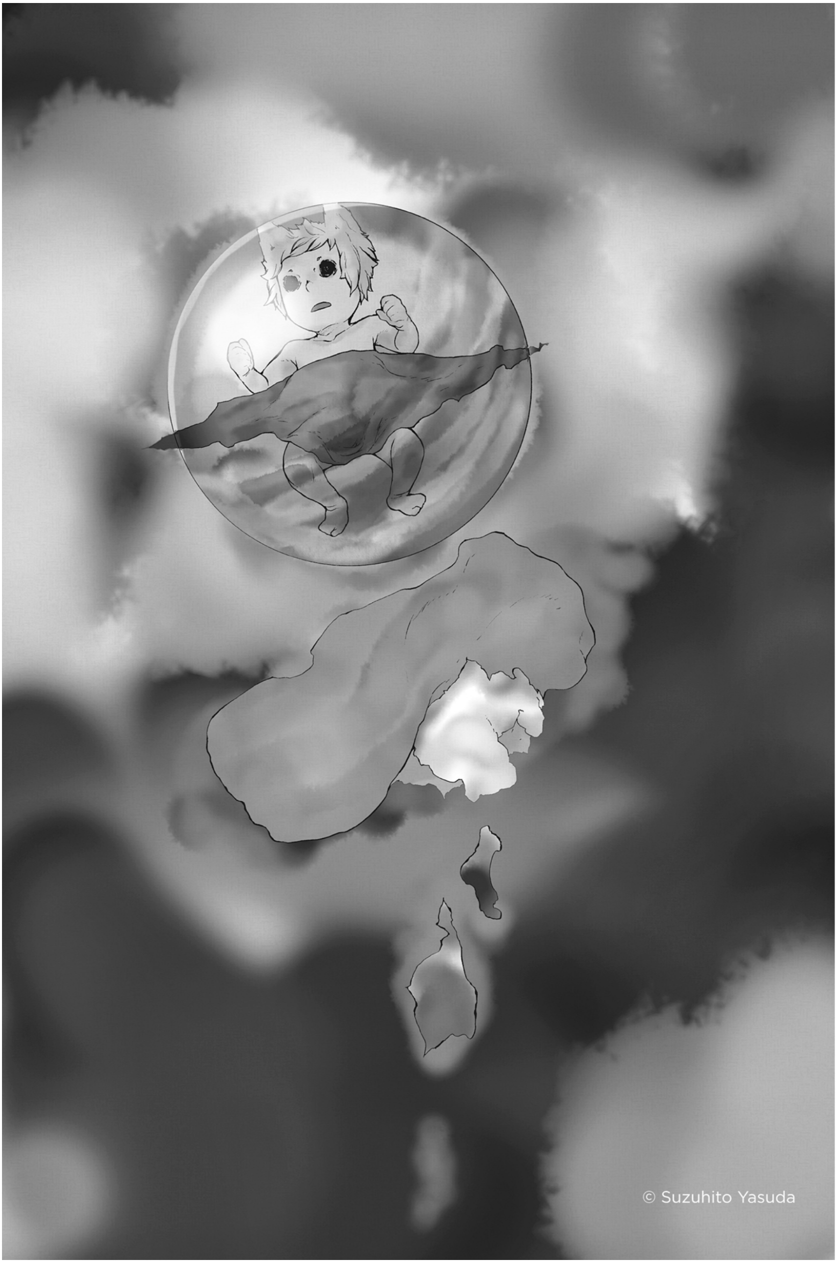
"Lunatic light?" echoed Hestia. It was Welf who answered her.

"It's an ore that gains magical attributes and glows different colors under the light of the moon. I know quite a few smiths who use it in their armor and weapons."

The young man went on to explain that the material had been made famous by a bard long ago who sang of his love for the glowing stone.

Takemikazuchi listened to Welf's story before adding another piece of information.

"The attributes of items and weapons that contain it change depending on the level of moonlight. Since there's no moonlight in the Dungeon, lunatic light is almost never used in Orario…"



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* * *

"And *toba* stones are most effective under a full moon. Should one be synthesized with a *tamamo* stone at full power, you get a Killing Stone."

The sand in the hourglass on Hermes's desk continued to slowly pour into the lower half. Hermes spoke as he moved different pieces on his chessboard.

Her glare as sharp as ever, Asfi opened her mouth to speak.

"The user…The renart's magical power—no, soul—becomes *sealed in the stone*."

"Exactly. And if everything is set up just right when they use it, the renart's unusual magic…their sorcery can be passed on to another. It's basically a magic sword that doesn't break."

Hermes moved another chess piece into place on the board and weakly smiled.

"But the price is steep: The sacrificed renart becomes a soulless shell."

Alive, but not among the living.

That's why the use of Killing Stones was forbidden.

A dark-magic item created by the ancestors of humanity, one that allowed another race to use renart sorcery.

"The surprising thing is that Killing Stones were created by renarts."

Hermes smiled again and leaned back in his chair. Asfi chose not to respond and looked at the positions of every piece on the chessboard.

A white army and a black army.

The black queen led a group of pawns in surrounding two unique pieces carved into the shape of a rabbit and a fox.

At the same time, the white queen was leading a charge into the heart of the enemy ranks, as if proudly brandishing her own power and influence.

"Children who become obsessed with power are quite scary indeed."

“What happens to the one losing their soul?!”

Chigusa’s voice shrieked, coming out much louder than usual.

The eyes of every other *Takemikazuchi Familia* member went wide with surprise. They didn’t know she was capable of producing that much noise. The human girl was on the verge of tears as she implored her god for an answer.

“If the Killing Stone is returned to the user, the renart will awaken. He or she should be able to live on as normal, assuming their physical body wasn’t damaged during their soul’s absence.”

Every person in the room was about to breathe a sigh of relief when they noticed the dark scowl still plastered on Takemikazuchi’s face. All eyes were on him as he continued.

“However, Killing Stones *shatter*.”

He went on to explain that a solid stone couldn’t release all its energy.

“Each shard of a morality stone is able to unleash the same amount of sorcery as the original. What’s worse, trigger spells are not necessary.”

An army of 10,000, each equipped with renart magic.

Every single one of them capable of sorcery.

While one on their own wouldn’t be much of a threat, an army of sorcerers would be an unstoppable force.

—Just like Crozzo’s Magic Swords.

Welf wasn’t sure who uttered those words. He ground his teeth together and clenched his fists so hard the bones started to creak.

“…What happens to the soulless child if a shard is lost or broken?”

Hestia couldn’t even look up as she spoke.

Takemikazuchi was the only one in the room who knew the answer to that question. He, too, lacked the courage to face anyone else, and his gaze wandered from place to place as he put it into words.

“At the very least, they would never be normal again. Even if every other piece was collected and returned, the child would become similar to a human baby…or suffer from mental disabilities.”

Chigusa’s knees gave out. Ouka managed to catch her moments before she hit the floor.

“So then, Lady Haruhime will…”

Tears emerged from eyes hidden behind her bangs.

That was Ishtar's plan. She had everything she needed: a Killing Stone and the renart, Haruhime.

There was no doubt she was planning to seal Haruhime's soul inside it.

"…Killing Stones contain lunatic light, meaning that the ceremony or ritual to transfer her soul will happen on the night of the full moon…"

"The next full moon…"

Takemikazuchi came to the grimmest realization as he listened to Lilly and Welf's hushed exchange of words. He looked up at the ceiling in hopeless despair.

"Tonight."

"—How ludicrous!"

Mikoto roared as she finished reading the last document.

Briefly forgetting that she was in the bowels of an enemy fortress, she gripped the paper roughly between her fingers, her hands shaking.

Haruhime's soul was going to be sealed within the Killing Stone—and split into thousands of pieces.

Mikoto lost her sense of calm. Her friend was about to be as good as dead.

How could this be allowed to happen? What was Ishtar trying to do, start a war? What would happen to Haruhime?

A firestorm of new questions engulfed her mind.

At the same time, her body took on a life of its own, and Mikoto left the archive with little more than a swish of black fabric.

"Sir Bell…Lady Haruhime!"

◆

Creak, creak. I push against a light stone panel. It opens upward, letting orange light into the tunnel.

I don't know how long we spent in there, but I can't express how good it feels to have a breath of fresh air after emerging from that underground maze.

"Finally…"

That word falls off my tongue as I step out into the light. The sky has taken on the reddish hue of early evening. I turn around and take Haruhime's hand, lifting her outside.

A hint of surprise flickers across her face before she thanks me and flashes another small grin.

"It's already this late…"

The stone panel blends in perfectly with the street's pavement. It's rather impressive, actually. I take another deep breath and look up at the sky above the Pleasure Quarter. Each building stands in stark contrast with the sunlight, pillars of shadow reaching up to the sky. It's been quite a day. First it was Dungeon crawling, then getting attacked, getting captured, getting rescued…No wonder I lost track of time.

I take another look around and see that this white backstreet is lined with run-down and abandoned brothels. I doubt there's anyone inside any of these buildings. Haruhime was right—no one will know we're back here.

"Thank you so much, Miss Haruhime. Rescuing me, guiding me out here…"

She turns her head to face me. Once again she looks like a painting, the only splash of color in front of a backdrop of buildings in disrepair. Then she smiles.

"I have done only as I desired. Please do not concern yourself. More importantly, please leave this place with haste."

"But…"

"You have my word, Master Cranell, I will make sure Miss Mikoto escapes with her life."

Mikoto? Oh, I guess she thinks I'm hesitating because I'm worried about her.

I am, of course, but…there's something else that's bothering me.

The way Haruhime has been keeping a strong front; it just doesn't add up.

And then there's her choice of words when we were underground.

It feels like there's something lurking in a thick, mysterious fog, something dangerous. But I just can't put my finger on it.

"Miss Haruhime, are you really sure? If you go back, you'll…"

So much is on my mind that I have to fight to string words together. It sounds like an excuse, but I'm afraid for her. Haruhime's gone against the will of her own familia to protect

Mikoto and me. I can't just leave her.

"…Master Cranell. Take a look at this."

I stay planted on the spot as she gestures to the black collar around her thin neck.

"This is a magic item that tracks my location…I am constantly connected to an invisible chain."

"Huh…?"

"Lady Ishtar and the Berbera are constantly informed of my whereabouts. Should I take one step out of the Pleasure Quarter, it will emit a loud ring and burn my skin while restraining my movements. Pursuers will catch up with me in very little time."

My jaw drops.

Then she explains that any attempt to destroy it would cause the alarm to sound. All the while, she runs her fingertips down its shiny black surface.

"Should the alarm trigger, Berbera will descend on this place.

"So please hurry," she pleads again. "This is as far as I can go."

She smiles weakly and falls silent.

"No, it shouldn't be like this…"

This isn't right.

I've never been so sure of anything in my life.

Why would *Ishtar Familia* go to such extreme measures to keep a low-level noncombatant in line?

Why would a magic item be necessary to restrain her?

The only answer I can think of is that Haruhime has some important role to play for the familia.

In that case, were we naive to think we could free her with a redemption…? I can practically hear the wheels turning in my head.

That's when the images start flashing.

Haruhime calling herself a soiled prostitute, while talking with distant eyes about glorious old days.

Sitting in the back of little more than a prison cell, watching the outside world with envy through a barred window.

A distant smile, as if she'd given up.

Maybe her status as a prostitute isn't the cause of her pain?

I can't help but feel I'm missing something very important. I'm not going anywhere until I figure this out.

"…Master Cranell, please run."

She takes a step closer to me, her voice more urgent than before. When suddenly—

“Sir Bell!”

A new voice echoes from above.

“Miss Mikoto?”

I turn around and catch a glimpse of her jumping out of one of the shadows. In the blink of an eye she lands in front of me with a soft thud.

Oh yeah, she has that Skill. She must’ve found a way to escape the palace on her own and followed me out here. Her black ponytail rides the breeze behind her as she stands and turns to stare at us. Haruhime looks just as surprised as I am.

Both of us are thrown off for a moment by her strange clothes, but it doesn’t take Haruhime long to realize that her childhood friend has found her once again.

“Miss Mikoto…”

“Lady Haruhime, I have a question to ask.”

“…What is it?”

Mikoto cuts short the joy of their reunion.

There’s a hint of desperation in her face. She pauses for a moment to gather her thoughts before whispering two words.

“…Killing Stone.”

“!!”

Haruhime’s act of strength crumbles in front of me.

Shoulders start shaking, eyes grow wide, head droops low.

Mikoto watches the transformation, looking like she could cry at any moment.

What is going on? Before I have a chance to ask, Mikoto’s next words make my blood run cold.

“Tell me it’s all a lie! That tonight…you are not becoming a sacrifice!”

Sacri—fice…?

Doing my best to get over the shock, I look at Haruhime. She’s still staring at her feet, making no attempt to deny anything.

“Lady Haruhime!” yells Mikoto as she rushes to her side.

“—So that’s how it is.”

But another voice stops her in her tracks.

“?!”

A shadow streaks toward Haruhime and Mikoto like an arrow, black hair trailing in its wake.

It wraps itself around Haruhime, leaving Mikoto in stunned silence.

“Sheesh, how long you known each other?”

It’s Aisha. She’s holding an immense wooden blade in her left hand.

Using her right hand, Aisha presses Haruhime’s face to her chest, holding her close while grumbling.

“Aisha?!”

She stands at least a full head taller than the renart and has completely sealed her movement.

At least it seems like Aisha could be preventing Haruhime’s escape or is shielding her from us; I’m not sure which.

“So it seems like you’ve figured it all out. Our plan, that is.”

“…Well, then?”

There are about ten steps between us. Four figures in the backstreet, Mikoto and I square off against Aisha and Haruhime.

Mikoto takes an aggressive stance, readying her body, while Aisha turns her gaze this way. I can’t help but scream at the top of my lungs.

“What is the meaning of this?! Sacrificing Miss Haruhime… Why?!”

“…Everything is being done according to Lady Ishtar’s wishes. We’ll be using this Haruhime over here to wipe out *Freya Familia*.”

There were so many things I wanted to say, and that was the best I could do. Aisha smirks at me and starts telling me their grand scheme.

“Miss Aisha, stop!” squeals Haruhime from between Aisha’s breasts and struggles with all her might. However, the Amazon just tightens her grip until Haruhime stops struggling and continues.

—First, they seal Haruhime’s soul into a magic item called a Killing Stone.

—Then they break the stone into pieces large enough for the carrier to use renart magic, called sorcery.

—Lastly, they use that power to take down their goddess’s rival and sworn enemy, *Freya Familia*.

This is too much to take in at once. The scale is just too great.

Topple *Freya Familia*? The most powerful familia in Orario? With Haruhime’s “power”?

My confusion clears as she explains the Killing Stone’s purpose, as well as the fate of the sacrifice. I’d been so desperate to understand, panicking from lack of information, that when I finally understand, it hits me like a stone wall.

Part of me is still wondering if some outlandish magic item would really make their plan possible.

But the other part of me is reliving the night I spent with Haruhime, talking about one particular story.

It was about the genie trapped in a lamp. It was the same as her power, trapped until her master's wishes come true.

History repeats itself, there's always a connection to the past—I come to a rather cold conclusion.

"B-but Haruhime's power? She's just…?"

"Some low-ranking prostitute, is what you're gonna say? Hah! Have you already forgotten the whipping you took in the Dungeon? That was her 'power' that wiped the floor with you. That's sorcery."

There's nothing I can say back. I clear my throat as the memories of that battle come flooding back to me. Mikoto, too, by the sound of it. A tear runs down Haruhime's cheek, her expression somewhere between remorse and torment.

How could I forget those countless little sparkles surrounding Aisha as she landed blow after blow during that fight?

Her power was overwhelming. She made quick work of Mikoto and me with strength and speed equivalent to someone in the upper ranks of Level 4.

That enchantment-like light came from Haruhime's ability, the reason she would be sacrificed for the benefit of *Ishtar Familia* to become the power that ends *Freya Familia*. Everything falls into place.

She has the ability to increase the power of those around her. Combine that with a top-class adventurer like Phryne and every other combatant—

They just might succeed.

Dethroning *Freya Familia*—knocking them off the top.

"Lady Aisha, I implore you! Let Master Cranell and Miss Mikoto go free!"

Haruhime's scream brings me out of my train of thought.

Aisha doesn't even look down at the girl pleading with all her might.

"Can't do it. I can't allow someone who knows this much to walk away…Lady Ishtar wouldn't let them live."

Aisha makes her declaration while pointing her wooden blade in our direction.

Her eyes are cold as ice, piercing right through me. That's when my anger explodes.

"How can you stand by and watch this happen to someone in your own familia—YOUR OWN FAMILY?!"

"..."

"What is she, some kind of tool you throw away when you're done?"

My outburst has no effect on her. Aisha's face is solid as a mask.

"Lady Ishtar has promised to return the contents of the Killing Stone to Haruhime once the score has been settled with *Freya Familia*."

"You know she can't keep an empty promise like that!"

Mikoto roars at Aisha's words.

They're planning an all-out war against *Freya Familia*. There's no way to guarantee that every last shard of that stone will survive it, let alone be returned. Haruhime would never be *normal* again.

Our eyes burning with fury, the two of us refute Aisha's claims.

"What about you? Are you okay with this?"

My voice shakes with rage.

"...You two don't know."

Aisha sounds weary. Haruhime looks up at her in surprise.

"Nothin' causes more trouble and pain than the jealousy of a goddess."

"Eh...?"

"That jealousy is strong enough to change our world. Strong enough to mess with the fates of every human, start wars, and worse. Our goddess is consumed by it."

Black flames of hell burn behind that goddess's glamour, according to Aisha.

She continues in a rough voice, getting to the core of her claim.

"Talking anymore is pointless. We cannot disobey Lady Ishtar."

Her words ring with the resolve of a zealot—although she makes no attempt to hide her frustration—as Aisha and I lock eyes.

"I'll tell you about a dumb li'l prostitute. She hated a renart so much she could puke every time she saw the pitiful look on her face. No matter how good she treated her, the renart would just look back with a pathetic smile, like she'd thrown in the towel long ago."

"...!"

"That dumb prostitute, so full of hate, did something stupid in the past. She destroyed a certain stone, smashed it to pieces on arrival."

Haruhime's eyes shoot open in shock. She pulls her face back away from Aisha's chest. I don't think she's heard this before.

Mikoto and I are just as stunned.

But Aisha's not done talking. Her anger at that "dumb li'l prostitute" is rooted really deep. Every word she speaks, every breath she takes, is overflowing with anger that has nowhere to go.

"That prostitute's actions didn't stay under wraps for long. After she was beaten to within an inch of death by a frickin' toad, her head was…Charmed to the point of insanity by her goddess."

There is something else behind the anger; I can see it in her eyes. It's fear.

"She was utterly ravaged, to the point that the idea of going against the goddess's will made her hands shake. Breaking a stone made her collapse on the spot…That prostitute can't even think about going against Lady Ishtar anymore."

The wooden sword in her left hand is shaking. Her right arm tightens around Haruhime, almost like a reflex.

Mikoto and I just stand there, neither of us saying a word.

A new image comes into my mind.

A helpless Aisha, bruised and bloody at the mercy of an erotic goddess with the vigor of a necrophiliac.

Her face trapped between the goddess's hands, eyes wet with tears, as the deity sits above her, whispering words of tormented love into her ear before running her fingers down Aisha's beaten and battered skin, ignoring the screams of pain.

I've had only one brief encounter with that Goddess of Beauty, but I already have an idea of her devilish side.

It was strong enough to conquer the resolute spirit of the Amazon in front of me. It makes my palms drip with sweat just thinking about it.

I take a glance at Mikoto. She's forgetting to breathe.

"All the Berbera became united after said incident. Some wanted to brawl it out from the start, others are afraid of Lady Ishtar's wrath. But all of us know, nothing can stop this fight."

She said it was a thorough purge.

After that, even the Berbera who originally opposed the war with *Freya Familia* fell in line with the plan to use Haruhime. All the voices opposing the war vanished.

All according to Lady Ishtar's desire.

"The two of you don't understand how terrifying our goddess can be."

With that, Aisha falls silent.

Now it's Haruhime who's shaking. Aisha adjusts her grip before tilting her head and saying:

"…And I gotta say, why haven't either of you come at me yet? Why only words?"

She lifts one of her eyebrows as her eyelids fall.

"You know what's going to happen to this one here. Why not try to take her back? What are you waitin' for?"

""?!""

My shoulders jump. Mikoto has the same reaction.

Both of us remembered Hermes's warning all too well.

Doing anything to upset Lady Ishtar or her followers to the point of a skirmish would result in the absolute destruction of *Hestia Familia*.

The goddess and our friends would be drawn into a hopeless battle if we try to make a move.

If we took Haruhime now, the Berbera would surely follow.

One of the elite groups within Orario, with a vendetta against *Hestia Familia*.

"Well, that's…"

The words won't come out. My throat is dry, breath raspy.

Mikoto and I are frozen in place. My eyes quiver as I look at Haruhime.

Her eyes are hidden behind her bangs, fox ears clamped tightly against her head. She's not looking, she's not listening, only doing her best to hide inside Aisha's embrace. Seeing her like that makes something snap inside my heart.

"—Prostitutes are meant to be destroyed."

Why that, why now?

Why would I remember those words at a time like this?

"…Hopeless after all. I can't give you this girl, Bell Cranell."

Aisha calls out my name, her fierce glare locked on my motionless body.

"And if you're lookin' for sympathy, forget it. Makes me wanna go hurl."

"N-no, that's not…!"

"So then, you sayin' you can save her? Doesn't look like it to me. Can't leave this in your hands, now can I?"

She cuts me off before I can say anything else. Her very presence is towering, overwhelming me at every turn.

There's no mercy in her eyes. At the same time, her voice sounds like she's issuing a challenge.

"I ain't saying you're weak. You lack resolve, spirit."

"…!"

"You don't have the resolve to risk everythin' to save Haruhime."

That piercing stare sees right through me, her words ensnaring my heart like ice-cold claws.

"You don't have *the face of a man*."

The verbal stake was set. Then she brings down the hammer.

"No arrogance, no swagger, you don't show any desire to dominate, to take what you want.

"All I see is a punk-ass brat with his head in the clouds.

"You can't give everythin' you have for this girl."

There's a clear tone of disappointment in Aisha's voice as her rant finally comes to a close.

Those words cut deep. I want to respond, to say anything to defend myself, but nothing comes. It's the same for Mikoto as well.

Aisha's disappointment is now written all over her face. She looks back and forth at us, as if expecting a challenge that never comes.

Haruhime looks like a scared child, just wishing that the whole thing would come to an end…She has her arms wrapped around her body, biding her time.

Four figures standing in a wide backstreet, bathed in orange sunlight.

"—Found them—this way!"

The voices of other Amazons cut through the stillness.

Mikoto and Haruhime immediately look in the direction of the newcomers. They're still a ways off but should be here in moments.

Aisha doesn't move; her eyes are still on me, on my pathetic face. What's worse, I still can't move.

"—Miss Mikoto, make your escape!"

Haruhime, however, can.

Twisting out of Aisha's grasp, she jumps on top of the Amazon's left arm and wraps her whole body around it, lowering her blade.

Haruhime's sudden scream brings Mikoto out of her trance and surprises Aisha at the same time. Mikoto jumps to my side and takes hold of my arm.

“Sir Bell!”

She practically drags me backward, my legs taking a few moments to remember how to walk.

The long shadows of the Berbera are reaching toward us. Aisha is just standing there, Haruhime hanging on with all her might. I leave them behind.

I…run away.

“…”

“Follow them!” “Don’t let ’em get away!” Haruhime and Aisha watched and listened to the shouts of many Amazons clamoring as they ran past.

Aisha watched her allies fan out in pursuit of the two humans and let her body relax.

“…Cut it out, will you, idiot.”

Swish. The palm of Aisha’s right hand collided with Haruhime’s head, easily breaking her grip and knocking her to the ground. “Awh,” came a weak cry from the renart as she realized how futile her actions had been.

At Level 1, Haruhime had had no hope of restraining Aisha from the start. She brought her hand to her head, taking shallow breaths just above the stone pavement. Aisha looked away from her and in the direction the two humans had disappeared.

Red light from the setting sun illuminating half her face, she frowned.

* * *

“They have to be around here—find ’em!”

The voices of many women are swirling around us.

Noncombatant prostitutes are taking orders directly from the Berbera. There are so many echoes of footsteps, I can’t tell anymore which ones are real.

“Haaa…haa…!”

We evaded pursuit and arrived at a dark side path.

No sunlight reaches in here. Soon, the footsteps fade away and the only echoes come from Mikoto and me trying to breathe.

Mikoto finally releases the painful grip on my arm and turns to face me.

"I…We…"

Unable to answer the words Mikoto squeezed out of her throat, I stumble to the side and put both hands on the nearest wall.

At the ash-colored stone wall, my head bends low, strained breath reaching down to my feet.

I stare at the black ground with my eyes wide open. The muscles in my face contort as my emotions finally catch up with me.

—She was right, right about everything!

Everything that Aisha said was true.

I couldn't put everything on the line for Haruhime.

I weighed the goddess and my friends—against her!

Not once did I say I was going to save her!!

"GAH…!"

I clamp my mouth shut, but still my frustration vents out from between my teeth.

The risk of being targeted by *Ishtar Familia* is too great. I was too scared to make a decision.

I couldn't reach out to help that girl with her head drooping low, couldn't even say I would.

I…I couldn't make up my mind.

Everything around me goes fuzzy. I'd close my eyes, but the back of my eyelids are hot, almost burning.

My pitiful, wretched self, too pathetic to save a trembling girl, to save Haruhime.

Worst of all, I couldn't make a decision and ran away from her.

Anguish, regret, remorse. There's a storm in my head that's threatening to rip everything apart.

"Sir Bell…"

Mikoto says my name through hushed, tearful breaths.

She's suffering, too.

Trapped between her friendship with Haruhime and her bonds with our goddess, our family.

Her fists are clenched so tight that her bones might break through the skin. She couldn't make a decision, either.

Tears of helplessness run down her cheeks.

"I…!"

What should I do? What can I do?

Should I run away, forget about Haruhime and save myself?

Keep the goddess and everyone else safe from harm and turn my back on her?

Or, should I follow through on this selfishness?

Listen to the voice screaming in my heart, rather than try to ignore it?

Constant wondering, impossible choices, thoughts that won't fade. Time continues to flow forward, but I'm stuck in this enigma, a labyrinth with no exit in sight.

The sky far above my head has gone dark, the light of the full moon coming into the city.

Someone…

Anyone, tell me what to do.

Person, fairy, or deity, I don't care which.

What should I do? What can I do?

I…I don't know.

—Now, if he *were here…*

If Gramps were here.

If the man who raised me were here, what would he say?

If he saw me standing still when I knew that girl was in trouble, what would he say to me?

I take a step away from the wall and try to visualize how that conversation would go.

There's, um, someone I want to help.

But I have a family I don't want to lose.

What do you think I should do?

What do you think I can do?

Do you think it would be okay…if I screamed everything in my heart up at the sky?

I do my best to find every memory lurking in the back corners of my mind. Time we spent together, my childhood, his lessons. Then I ask.

And…

The vision of him my brain puts together…

The memory of my grandfather—smirks.

"—Go."

Said the vision without an aggravating smile.

"!!"

A new flame burns in my eyes.

My right fist clenches as much as it can.

"Can't save one little lady? You call yourself a man?"

He'd say that.

If he were here, he'd say that for sure.

Knowing Gramps, he'd give me the first push.

—And he's right.

Decide.

Decide!

Just decide already!

Being made fun of, being laughed at, pointed at, that's not shameful.

The most shameful thing is to be at a crossroads but not be able to make up your mind!

I—

—I'm going.

I'm going to save her.

I'm going to save that girl, the one who can't smile from the heart.

"…Sorry, Miss Mikoto."

My voice shakes. She looks up at me with wide eyes, shoulders quivering like she's afraid of what I'm about to say.

I slowly turn toward her and stand up straight. Tears drip off my chin as I hold my head high for the first time in far too long.

"I…I want to save her."

Mikoto blinks a few times, my words sinking in.

I'm going to save Haruhime, putting the familia in danger. I ask for her forgiveness.

I somehow manage to keep from crying and close my mouth. Mikoto steps up to me.

"B-but what do you do after rescuing Miss Haruhime? *Ishtar Familia* would pursue you until—"

"I'll leave Orario."

I jump in before she can finish her question. Now it's my turn to be afraid of her next words. I struggle to keep my face steady. Mikoto's stunned.

I'll apologize to the goddess until I have one foot in the grave.

I'll apologize as soon as I have no choice but to leave the city.

This is like what happened with *Apollo Familia*.

Except this time I'll be leaving Orario to save the life of one girl.

"I'll run away from Orario…But I promise I'll come back."

"Eh?"

"Stronger—strong enough to protect her, stronger than I am now!"

Then I'll come back. I'll come back to Orario.

No matter how long it takes, no matter how long the detour I have to follow, I will return to my idol.

Once I'm strong enough to protect Haruhime, nothing will stop me from coming back inside the city walls.

Be realistic for a second! I yell at myself as Mikoto gulps down the air in her throat.

Who was it I thought of the first time I saw Haruhime's beautiful golden hair?

Who was it who appeared in my heart?

If I abandoned Haruhime now…Whenever I see my idol from this day forward…

I would remember Haruhime and wouldn't be able to look her in the eyes again.

I want to stand in front of her, chest out, and proudly proclaim that I've become a man worthy of her attention. That will never happen if I turn my back on Haruhime.

I will never, ever give up on Haruhime, on my friends, or on her. I will struggle against any odds as long as it takes. So—

I meet Mikoto's gaze, my eyes unwavering.

The stunned look on her face crumbles away, eyes glistening with fresh tears as a wide smile appears on her lips.

"Becoming a member of your familia…has never made me so happy as right now."

She takes another step forward and grabs my right hand. A fresh wave of tears flows down her cheeks as she smiles from ear to ear.

"That you are my leader, to have met you in the first place…I am so grateful."

She pulls my hand into her chest, voice becoming smaller with every word.

Her lips form the words *thank you* over and over. Her tears sparkle as they fall into the palm of my hand.

"…I shall gladly join you, be at your side in dogeza at the feet of Lady Hestia, Lady Lilly, and Sir Welf. Let us be scolded together!”

Mikoto releases my hand and wipes her face on her sleeve. When she finally looks up, I’ve never seen a more joyous smile in my life.

That broke the dam. This girl not only listened to my selfish decision, she agreed to help me, to join me. And with that smile. My eyes glisten as new tears threaten to spill out.

We exchange disheveled smiles. Taking a moment to compose ourselves, both of us nod, knowing exactly what we have to do.

We don’t have to look cool.

Being caked in dirt and blood doesn’t matter at all.

I don’t care if it all ends here.

It’s time to become her hero.

I’ll be the one who reaches out to save her, prostitute or not, to become the hero she had always dreamed of.

“…!”

Determination in our eyes, Mikoto and I look back the way we came.

Looking up from the back of the dark side path, we can see the golden exterior of a palace shining in the moonlight.

◆

“After all that, you sayin’ you let the bunny get awayyy?!”

The renart hidden behind her back, shoulders trembling, as Phryne’s booming voice filled the air…

Aisha remained surprisingly calm as she protected Haruhime. A large group of Berbera had assembled in a wide chamber within the palace.

“This mess was your fault, going against Lady Ishtar’s orders. Don’t go blaming me.”

“Don’t give me any of that craaap! If that varmint behind you hadn’t released my prey, everything woulda been fiiine!”

The Amazon’s bloodshot, bulging frog-like eyes were locked onto Haruhime.

The veins in Phryne’s head started throbbing. That’s when her red gaze turned to Aisha.

“The Killing Stone, they know we have iiit. The Little Rookie can’t be allowed to liiiive! If he goes free…how you gonna own up to it, Aishaaa?”

Groups of Amazons were on the move throughout Belit Babili. Half of them were in hot pursuit of the two humans who’d learned of the Killing Stone. The others were busy making preparations for the Killing Stone Ritual. There wasn’t an idle pair of feet to be seen.

Noise from the bustling activity below reached the chamber despite being close to the top of the highest tower in the compound. Aisha gave Phryne a quick glance, shrugged, and said:

“That boy, he’ll come.”

“Huuuh? You say that because…?”

Completely unfazed by Phryne’s death stare, Aisha casually looked out the window.

“He didn’t have the look of a man, but those eyes…”

She could see the red-light district, its lanterns lighting up one by one.

“Those of an adventurer who doesn’t know when to give up.”

Haruhime listened to Aisha’s harsh whisper and looked up at the side of her face. The renart’s expression shifted to show the range of emotions that was surging within her.

She too looked outside, down at the Pleasure Quarter—down at the place where that boy and girl probably were right now.

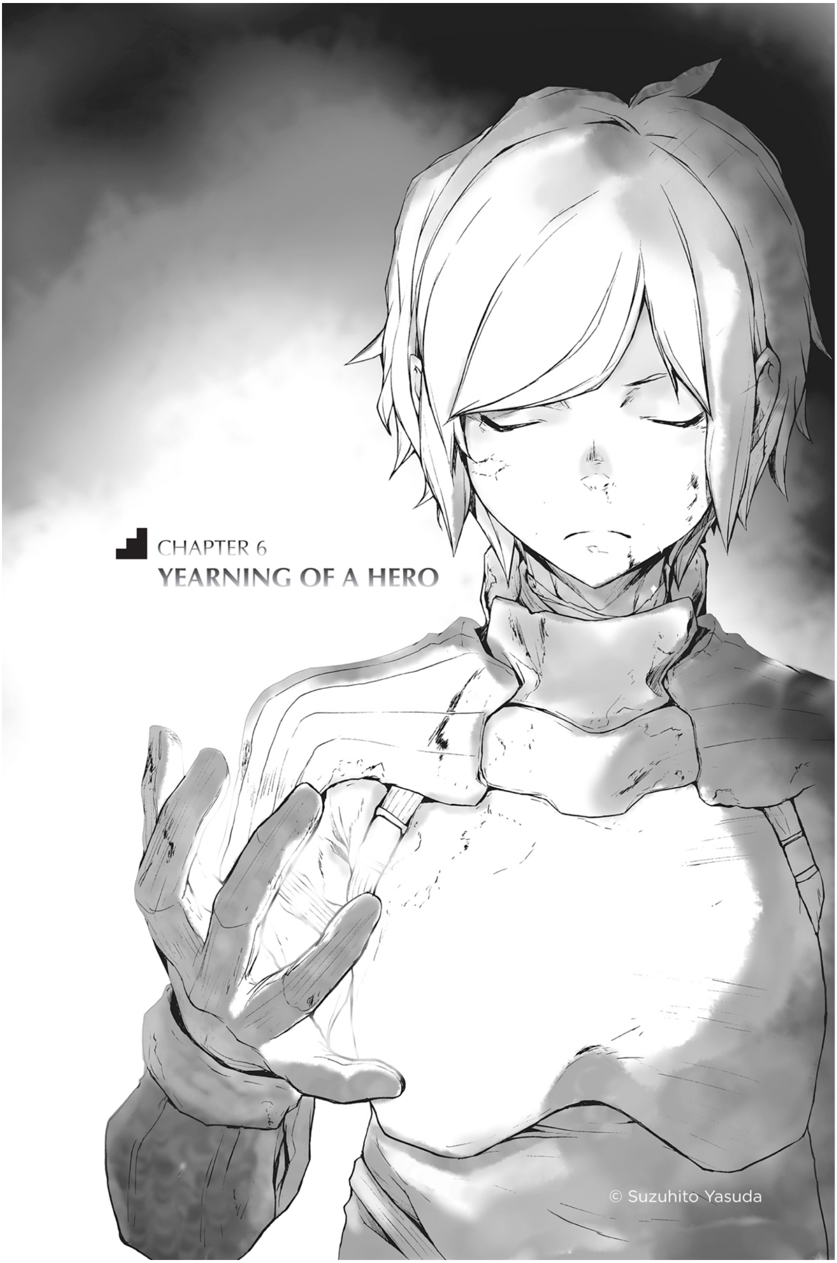
At the same moment, the boy and girl were looking at the palace from a distance.

Emerging from a dilapidated back alley, just the two of them stood below a goddess’s shining fortress.

The darkness spread in the sky above them.

A golden moon gradually grew clearer, brighter, and fuller with the coming night.

For the sake of saving one prostitute, the boy and girl prepared to assault the palace.



CHAPTER 6

YEARNING OF A HERO

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CHAPTER 6

YEARNING OF A HERO

"Bell and Mikoto have to be here. Let us through!"

The last of the natural sunlight was fading from the evening sky as Hestia arrived at the outer corner of the Pleasure Quarter. Guards moved to block her path almost immediately.

They were standing at the edge of Orario's third district, the place where *Ishtar Familia*'s territory officially began.

Hestia was accompanied by Welf and Lilly, as well as Takemikazuchi, on her mission to rescue the rest of her familia. They were blocked by two Amazons just before entering the main strip of brothels on Main Street. A standoff ensued.

"My pardon, goddess, do you have any proof?"

"Watch your words. Any funny business and we'll remove you by force."

"Grrr…" Hestia started growling, getting steadily louder as the two female warriors gripped the weapons strapped to their backs: One carried a battle-ax; the other pulled twin longswords just far enough out of their sheaths to make the blades flash.

A group of Amazons had attacked Lilly and Welf in the Dungeon, but they had no evidence.

"UGHAAA!!" Hestia's voice erupted, her hands rising in the air as the two enemy warriors grinned at her frustration.

"They sure are giving us the runaround…"

"Well, were we expecting anything else?"

Male customers who started arriving on Southeast Main Street and their prostitutes stopped in their tracks to gawk at the enraged deity. Lilly could only sigh at her goddess's childish arguing technique. Welf crossed his arms but watched the Amazons like a hawk.

Takemikazuchi stood not too far away from them, his black hair in the usual bobbed, triangular style. His own followers started emerging out of the crowd and gathered around him. Their scouting mission complete, it was time to make a plan of their own.

"Ouka, what did you see?"

"They have this area completely locked down. Not even a rat could sneak in unnoticed."

"Amazons and prostitutes are blocking every street…There's no opening."

Takemikazuchi listened to Ouka, Chigusa, and his other followers. "I see," he muttered, eyebrows sinking.

He reasoned that it was likely this was a cage to keep Bell and Mikoto from revealing the existence of the Killing Stone to anyone else. At the same time, it acted as a barrier to keep anyone else from interfering with the Killing Stone Ritual.

While he was still unsure why they had captured the two humans, he was sure they were inside.

"Mikoto…"

Concern for the girl's well-being written all over his face, Takemikazuchi looked up at the full moon that was peeking out from behind rolling clouds.

"Sir Bell, please take this potion with you as well."

"If you're sure, thank you. I'll take it."

At the same time two deities were trying to get into Orario's third district, Bell and Mikoto were undergoing their last preparations in their hidden alcove under the night sky.

The two of them were planning to break into the palace alone and rescue Haruhime. They had to be ready for anything.

They had briefly considered leaving the Pleasure Quarter and returning with reinforcements. However, they thought better of it. Deep in the heart of Ishtar's territory, they might not get a better chance to strike at this range. If they left now, there was no guarantee that they'd get a chance to strike at all. Therefore, they stayed hidden and divided up the high-quality healing potions and supplies Mikoto had taken from the vault.

Mikoto sat on the ground, tying her clothing to her joints to reduce the sound of the fabric. Dressed completely in black, she looked more and more like a ninja every second. Even while talking with Bell, a conversation she had with Takemikazuchi many years ago floated to the front of her mind.

"Mikoto, you are the most physically suited to learn ninjutsu out of everyone. However, you don't have the right mind-set."

At the time, her god had already trained her in how to use many weapons and in styles of hand-to-hand combat, so the time came to train her in the ways of the ninja.

"Listen well, Mikoto. Ninjutsu is…dirty."

"D-dirty?"

"Yes. A ninja is not picky about the methods used to complete the mission."

Mikoto had been sitting on her heels, sweating in the humid air as she listened to her god say these things as though it was common sense.

"Sneak attacks, ambushes, traps…A ninja uses every option, any means to reach their goal. So, to be blunt, someone as straightforward and honest as yourself might not have much use for it."

Even so, Takemikazuchi taught her everything he knew. Once they came to Orario, Mikoto distinctly remembered Takemikazuchi telling her while smiling to himself that she was much more suited to be an adventurer.

She truly missed being around him. His calming smile at the forefront of her mind, Mikoto took a deep breath and used the image to calm her nerves.

She was using Bell's Ushiwakamaru in place of the katana that was broken in the Dungeon. She also borrowed his item pouch and filled it with everything except the potions she had liberated from their enemy.

Feeling light as a feather, she nodded to herself.

"Sir Bell, I would like to confirm the plan one last time."

"Of course," said Bell as he kneeled in front of her.

"According to the scrolls I read, the ritual must be performed when the full moon first reaches its brightest peak, approximately eight o'clock tonight. Location will be at the top of one of the palace towers, an area called the Floating Garden…but please ignore that last piece of information."

Mikoto proceeded to explain the Killing Stone Ritual, including the time limit and other details. She glanced up at the clouds blocking the full moon from view, knowing they were almost out of time. "There will be no ploy," she said before explaining the attack plan.

"First off, Sir Bell will garner the most attention, break into the palace, and cause a diversion…"

"While Miss Mikoto rescues Miss Haruhime."

Bell echoed their simple plan before Mikoto could finish. However, her eyes were clouded with concern.

"This may be our only option…But are you certain, Sir Bell? All danger falls squarely on your shoulders."

Bell knew full well that if he was drawn into combat, countless more enemies would swarm in in an attempt to overwhelm him. Clearing his throat, he simply said, "I'll do it."

"…Give me twelve—no, ten minutes. I will find Lady Haruhime and get her to safety."

Bell's ruby-red eyes locked onto her dark-violet gaze; both shone with the light of determination.

Seeing Bell's conviction empowered Mikoto with even more courage and resolve.

"…Lastly, what we should do should our plan fail."

Neither of them wanted to talk about it, but Mikoto knew they had to cover all bases.

Bell lent her his ears, his expression just as serious.

"Once I have made contact with Lady Haruhime, I will send up a flare. Green if I've succeeded, and red if—"

"Not…and in that case…?"

"…We break into the most heavily guarded area in the enemy stronghold and destroy the Killing Stone. That's our only choice."

It wouldn't solve the problem of *Ishtar Familia* acquiring another Killing Stone, but it would buy them time, as well as cancel tonight's ritual.

"Should it come to pass, improvisation will be necessary…One of us will need to draw attention while the other breaks the stone. I believe that is all we can plan for at this time."

Bell had no objections to Mikoto's plan of attack. Every item necessary for the ritual was set in the Floating Garden, waiting for the moonlight. The location of the ritual could not be moved at the last minute. Their plan in place, the two humans exchanged one final nod.

"Well then, Sir Bell…May the tides of battle flow in your favor."

"You, too, Miss Mikoto. Take care of Miss Haruhime."

Then they split up.

Emerging from their dark side path, Bell and Mikoto moved out to get into their respective positions.

Careful to evade the eyes of Amazons and prostitutes alike, Bell made his way to the front gate of *Ishtar Familia*'s home. Staying just out of sight, he eyed the front gate and weighed his options.

"…"

Well hidden in the shadows of a nearby brothel, Bell took a knee and looked at the palm of his right hand.

Bell knew exactly who might show up—Aisha, the Berbera, and, of course, Phryne.

As for what to do when that Level 5, top-class adventurer appeared, he had no clue. Of all the scenarios that played in his head, not one of them ended in victory.

Bell glanced at the rest of his body. Light armor completely destroyed, only a layer of cotton protected his skin. *BA-DUM BA-DUM.* The thumps of his heart banged against the inside of his chest.

"This is all I've got…"

Ring, ring. Bell whispered to himself as soft chime sounds echoed and points of light started swirling around his right arm. He focused as hard as he could and bit down on his lip.

More light started to gather in the palm of his hand. But would it really hit his target? Would he even be able to charge it in time to use in battle? Even more questions surged into Bell's head. Shaking it from side to side, he ignored the voices and clenched his fist.

I have to make it work, he said to himself as even more of the specks of light slipped into the center of his fist between his clenched fingers.

A heartbeat later, Bell jumped out of the shadows.

"Wha…?!"

"Little Rookie?!"

He could clearly see the golden palace and the front gardens beyond the main gate, as well as the stunned faces of all the Amazons who had been assigned to protect it.

None of them had even considered the possibility that he would come to their home base on his own. Panicking, each of them reached for their weapons or turned their backs to sound the alarm.

Bell thrust his right arm forward before any of the Amazons were able to get very far.

Ten-second charge.

A small bell sound rang out, signaling the start of the battle as the boy roared at the top of his lungs:

"FIREBOLT!!"

The pillar of white light accompanied the thunderous roar of a flaming lightning bolt.

The front gate of the palace was utterly destroyed in the ensuing explosion and every single one of the guards was launched skyward.

Screams and shrieks rose into the air, along with an enormous amount of smoke. Bell charged forward, right through it all.

Running as fast as he could, he quickly reached into his leg holster and withdrew two potions he'd received from Mikoto: a high potion and a high-mind potion. He downed them both in one gulp and discarded the empty vials in one swift motion. Emerging from the smoke, Bell raced up the front steps of the palace and into the building.

The mission to save one girl was now officially under way.

◆

"You wanna explain that explosion?"

Greatsword balanced on his shoulder, Welf yelled at the two Amazons.

Everyone in the area was looking at the mushroom cloud rising from the middle of the third district. Even Hestia stopped glaring at the guards the moment the explosion reached her ears.

Lilly ignored the sudden chaos and used the opportunity to press the Amazon roadblock.

"There's the undeniable proof!! That explosion was caused by Mr. Bell's Firebolt!"

"Out of the way!"

The Amazons knew there was no way Lilly and Welf could discern a type of Magic from this distance, but they also figured out there was no way to prove them wrong. Snapping their tongues in frustration, the two drew their weapons in earnest.

"So what if it was? You trying to start a war?"

"We're *Ishtar Familia*!"

Lilly hesitated for a moment, the reality of her actions hitting home—a mountain of a shadow passed over her.

The enormous man reached out and grabbed the closest Amazon by the throat, lifted her up, and threw her to the side.

The other guard was just as surprised as the thrown Amazon, watching her ally tumble down the stone pavement. Then she looked up at a pair of furious human eyes honing in on her. The massive human, Ouka, took another step forward and said only one word:

"Move."

Ouka had had enough of standing idly by while Mikoto and Haruhime were in danger. His decisive action inspired the rest of *Takemikazuchi Familia* to draw their own blades and prepare for battle. Ouka unhooked his great ax from his back and led the party of humans from the Far East into a line of red-faced Amazons.

"Everyone together!"

"Ha-ha-ha, that's what I'm talking about!"

Welf laughed and joined their formation as Ouka led the opening charge. The battle had officially begun.

Lilly loaded her bow gun and surveyed the battlefield. Orario's third district had become the stage for the opening acts of an all-out war.

"So it came to this after all…!"

"There was no time, couldn't be helped."

Welf and Ouka were powerful Level 2 adventurers, but their enemies had the advantage of numbers. Hestia watched the events unfold and sighed to herself, thinking that the situation couldn't be helped. She followed after Takemikazuchi and entered the street her allies had forcibly broken into.

◆

—If there was a true beginning to all this…

It started with one-sided animosity.

Ishtar hated Freya from the moment the two Goddesses of Beauty first met.

It could have been something as simple as a sibling rivalry, or perhaps it was caused by jealousy, wanting something she did not have. But in the end, she despised Freya to the point that she had tried to topple her many times.

On the other hand, Freya didn't have a strong opinion of Ishtar at all.

She would laugh off all the "provocations" and enjoy watching Ishtar retreat with every failure. That was the only time Freya ever paid any attention to her, so she didn't care one way or the other.

She didn't know if her indifference came from her power, fame, or influence.

Freya had reached the summit of Orario, undisputedly second to none. Meanwhile, Ishtar's rise had stopped at becoming queen of the debauched streets and districts in the metropolis.

Freya's name had spread like wildfire. Her followers were wrapped in fear. It was said that her beauty was unequaled throughout the world—and other nonsense like her charms could turn heaven and earth on their heels. The claims and compliments for Freya never halted.

This was the moment when she laughed at the jealousy of other goddesses.

That's when and why black flames surged within that glare of animosity, or perhaps it was destined to happen this way no matter how events came to pass.

However, if there was one thing that could be said…

The difference between the two Goddesses of Beauty, Freya and Ishtar, it was—

"My Lady."

The voice of her trusted follower pulled Freya's eyes away from her own reflection in the wineglass she was holding.

She placed the glass on a circular table at her side. Ottar took that as his signal and approached her.

"Allen has submitted a report. *Ishtar Familia* abducted Bell Cranell and is behaving suspiciously…Also, an explosion in the Pleasure Quarter occurred moments ago."

Freya stood up from her chair before Ottar had completely finished his sentence.

"The entire familia has been assembled, yes?"

"Yes."

"Issue a decree."

"Then your will is set."

"It is. Ishtar crossed the line."

Freya's voice was cool, calm, and collected. Her silver eyes narrowed as she spoke.

"All her little jokes were laughable until now. But this…No. I *won't* allow it."

Ottar watched Freya take a step away from her table—and then he turned to address a large crowd.

"To arms! Our goddess desires glory on the battlefield!"

All her warriors had gathered and were standing at attention in the main chamber beneath her throne. The sounds of marching boots filled the room as her followers filed out in ranks.

They readied their weapons of choice and moved out, wasting no movement. Their discipline was evidence of their deep-seated loyalty.

Without even a whisper of idle chatter, the household warriors assembled outside on the grounds of the silver fortress, Folkvangr. It was so organized it seemed as though they had practiced and arranged the movements beforehand.

Numbering well over one hundred, every one of them was ready to carry out their goddess's bidding.

"…Deplorable."

Following the last of the echoes through the hallways, Ottar escorted Freya out of the building.

Caught off guard by his goddess's sudden utterance, Ottar responded in a hushed voice:

"What is?"

"This turn of events."

Ottar frowned but kept walking.

Freya didn't notice. She shrugged to herself as the two of them arrived at the front door of their home.

"I, too, shall head out. We leave as soon as preparations are complete."

◆

Belit Babili was overrun in a flash by loud, angry voices.

"Intruders!"

"How many?"

"J-just one, the Little Rookie! He charged the front gate!"

Bell could hear all the Amazons shouting orders, caught glimpses of them pointing him out to their kin as he raced through the palace.

Making his way toward the center, he could see a tower, similar to Babel, rising toward the heavens. The base of the looming structure was composed of many long, wide floors. Bursting out of the outer ring and into the courtyard, he raced toward it and entered the first floor. Everything from stairwells, to pillars, to spaces between stones became his route to higher and higher floors up the inside of the tower.

"STOP HIM—!"

A large group of fully armed Berbera was in hot pursuit.

Bell immediately changed course whenever he caught a glimpse of anyone in his path. Wave after wave of arrows relentlessly rained down from every direction but, at the same time, gave him the best indication of where to run.

If I stop now, it's all over…!

This was the enemy stronghold. He had to avoid hundreds of warriors on his own.

If he lost even a step, a single second in combat facing any one of them, the rest would catch up and he'd be forced into a fight he could never win.

Flashes of his enemies zoomed by every corner of his vision. Bell knew he couldn't allow any of them to get close.

"Firebolt!"

"Ughhaa!"

He fired multiple rounds of his magic without breaking stride.

Spell chants—time to prepare magic abilities—were unnecessary with Bell's Swift-Strike Magic. The Amazons had no answer for a ranged attack that was faster and stronger than their arrows. They were either blown backward or stayed out of range, which meant they couldn't get close enough for a blade or fist.

Trying to carefully avoid hitting the noncombatant prostitutes he could see huddled up in fear in the hallways and chambers as he passed through, Bell aimed his Firebolt at any enemies, ceilings, and floors he could reach. Thunderous flames rained down within the central tower as Bell tried to cause as much chaos as possible.

"Loose!"

"Whaa?!"

Bell had just turned off a hallway onto a stairwell only to be greeted by a group of ten Amazonian archers with their arrows at the ready.

The twangs of their bowstrings rang through the stairwell as the arrows were launched before Bell had time to call forth his magic.

While he was able to deflect most of them with his Hestia Knife, the awkward swing made him lose his balance and he fell back down the stairs.

There was no time to recover; the next round of arrows was already on its way. Rolling out at the last instant, Bell caught a glimpse of the ten Amazons as each of them drew swords and jumped down the stairwell. Even more were coming from either side of the hallway. He immediately charged under the jumping Amazons, past the stairwell, down the hallway toward a window, and dived into it headfirst.

"He's outside!"

Breaking through the glass, he felt cool night air envelop his skin.

The moon was still partially hidden by cloud cover. Bell landed on the awning of the window below and used another to continue his ascent up the tower.

One window after another was shattered as the Amazons followed the agile rabbit outside and up the tower. They weren't giving him any breathing room.

It hasn't even been—three *minutes?!*

Beads of sweat flew off his skin. His lungs labored for breath. Even more dark shadows were on his tail. Bell decided now was the time to take the third potion out of his leg holster.

His heart beating so hard that his chest might implode at any second, Bell urged every muscle to keep firing. Feeling the effects of the potion kick in, Bell discarded the empty vial without losing a step. He kept drawing their attention, trying to get away while making as much noise as possible.

The evening lights of the Pleasure Quarter spreading out beneath him, Bell continued to lean on the one thing he knew surpassed the Berbera: his speed.

"Sir Bell, you have my gratitude."

—Meanwhile, on the complete opposite side of the palace…

Mikoto slipped into a window on the backside of Belit Babili completely unnoticed. Many guards had been pulled away from their stations. Even the patrols on the inside were much less frequent. No one could catch Bell, their original target. The only choice was to corner him with numbers. And those numbers had been pulled from the patrols.

Words of gratitude and apology on her lips, Mikoto moved swiftly and silently through the hallways. She hid in the shadows the moment approaching footsteps revealed the location of enemy warriors. Three or four groups of Berbera went past her without detecting her presence. At last, Mikoto came upon a single Berbera. She sensed the same spiritual pressure in the Amazon as herself, another Level 2.

Wasting no time, she withdrew a spherical crystal from her item pouch and rolled it at the Amazon coming toward her from farther down the hallway.

"…What's this…?"

The moment the Amazon bent down to inspect the shiny object, Mikoto dropped down from the ceiling and landed directly behind her target. Before her victim knew what happened, Mikoto had her arm around her neck.

What's more, the Ushiwakamaru blade was resting on top of the coppery skin of the Amazon's throat.

"Where is Lady Haruhime?"

"F-fortieth floor. Close to the Floating Garden."

That was all she needed to hear. She moved slightly to put her prisoner in a choke hold and, a moment later, the Amazon fell unconscious to the floor.

Mikoto wasted no time in dragging the limp warrior out of the hallway and into a room before disappearing without a trace. She was on her way to the fortieth floor.

"How dirty…" whispered Mikoto as she remembered Takemikazuchi's face. It was true; an adventurer would never want to pull off such an underhanded ambush.

Finding a window, Mikoto climbed outside and started scaling the building.

Far above, she spotted light coming from an open window.

◆

Haruhime was sitting in front of a certain window, trembling.

Just when she thought something unusual was going on, a report came in saying that the Little Rookie—Bell Cranell—had forced his way into the palace.

She stood up and made a break for the door but was caught by two Berbera and roughly escorted back to her seat. Now two of the intimidating warrior prostitutes stood on either side of her, watching her every movement with the same emotionless glare.

Haruhime had changed into a formal red kimono imported from the Far East. She cast her anxious gaze back out the window, her drooping golden tail twitching behind her chair.

"That boy did what…?"

No one had told her anything. The words involuntarily spilled out of her soft pink lips when her ears picked up the news from the conversations going on around her.

Thoughts like *why*, *how*, and *please stop*, among other fragmented thoughts, weakly spilled from her mouth.

Haruhime's gaze fell to the floor as she wrapped her arms around her thin body like she was afraid of what was going to happen next.

"All of you go help out. I'll stay here."

Aisha issued orders to the other Berbera in the same room where Haruhime was trying to make herself as small as possible.

Aisha volunteered to stay behind and protect their person of interest, but a rather large woman was much more concerned about capturing Bell and voiced an even larger dissent.

"You ain't leavin' the group, Aisha. You're comin' with me on the rabbit hunnnt."

"…Aahh?"

"Already forgotten the beatin' you got at our hands when you smashed the first Killing Stone, Aishaaa?"

The overgrown frog out of water, Phryne, squared her shoulders in front of Aisha and looked down on the thinner Amazon.

"Plannin' to use the chaos to let Haruhime escape, ehhhh? Can't trust you. So I want you where I can see you."

Other Amazons in the room seemed a bit confused by Phryne's words.

"You idiot," Aisha spat back. She felt the effects of Ishtar's Charm far more than anyone else present in the room and couldn't even think against her goddess at this point.

"The Little Rookie is an obvious decoy. The Eternal Shadow is comin' here for Haruhime."

"That's what I'm sayin'. Let the others handle the Level Two, third-tier shrimmmp. They don't need you or me."

With the exception of Phryne and Aisha, all the Berbera in the room were Level 2.

Every single one of the second-tier adventurers was currently pursuing Bell, their Statuses matching his at Level 3.

Phryne's nostrils flexed as she claimed with absolute confidence that someone at Mikoto's level wouldn't stand a chance against these numbers anyway.

"That girl used an unbelievable spell during the War Game. If she's underestimated—"

"Shut up alreadyyy!"

Phryne bellowed loud enough to shake the room. The Berbera and Haruhime all recoiled in surprise.

Her bloodshot eyes once again fell onto a surprisingly unfazed Aisha.

"All you have to do is follow my orders. Or do you want me to smash in that faaace?"

Aisha did her best to ignore the incredible stench emerging from Phryne's wide mouth as her face shifted into a frown.

When she destroyed the first Killing Stone, Aisha had been thoroughly "disciplined" by Phryne's brutal methods before being dragged before Ishtar as a nearly lifeless wreck.

"Or perhaps…you'd like all your other little varmints to have a taste?"

Aisha's stoic expression suddenly showed a flash of concern.

That, more than anything else, struck fear into the hearts of the other Berbera as they watched on.

Those Amazons trusted Aisha far more than their leader, Phryne. That was especially true for the younger ones. Aisha treated them like younger sisters—as she did with Haruhime—and looked after them.

"Did you forget, Aishaaa? Next time you stick a toe out of line, it won't be just you who gets devoured. All the others get their turn…Lady Ishtar warned you herself, didn't sheee?"

Ishtar had been testing Aisha's loyalty. Perhaps "playing with it" would be a better way to describe her demeanor.

Despite being overwhelmingly Charmed by her goddess, Aisha still possessed her own free will and would never become a true puppet. However, that meant that she felt every ounce of fear as she was forced to choose between Haruhime and the well-being of her adopted younger siblings. She was constantly balancing a scale that would break her heart should either side fall.

This state of constant unease was Ishtar's punishment for breaking the Killing Stone.

"Well?" came a pompous demand. Aisha's lips twitched before she finally opened her mouth.

"…Fine."

The gorgeous Amazon decided to follow orders.

"Ge-ge-ge-ge-ge-ge-geh!" Phyrne's croaking laughter echoed throughout the room.

They equipped their weapons and prepared to find the intruder.

"Keep an eye on the time, then go to the altar. See to it that Haruhime is brought to Samira and the others when everything is set."

Phryne turned to address the other Berbera just before leaving the room, and she issued her last orders.

Then the massive woman led Aisha and a group of her most trusted allies out the door.

"Oh? He broke in?"

The divine voice echoed on the top floor of the main tower inside Belit Babili, the goddess's private quarters.

Ishtar sat on a lavish sofa and listened to a report on Bell's sudden attack.

"It appears he's running wild through the inside of the palace… All attempts to capture him thus far have failed."

"Running wild, you say. No one charges into a lion's den without a reason."

Ishtar held her long oriental pipe in one hand, purple smoke emerging from one end. She listened to her assistant Tammuz's report before taking a long drag from the pipe.

The windows on all four sides of her quarters had been opened. A light breeze blew the smoke from her lips and the tip of the pipe.

"Perhaps he left something behind…A woman who found her way into his heart?"

The goddess narrowed her eyes, deep in thought.

"He will be captured at once."

"No, don't. Call them back."

Tammuz didn't know what to say as Ishtar stood up from her comfortable sofa.

She didn't pay any attention to her human follower. Instead, an ominous smile grew on her lips.

"This could be interesting. I'll go myself."

Standing up to her full height, the goddess didn't say another word as she descended the closest staircase toward the sounds of battle.

* * *

Bell had reached the thirtieth floor of the palace tower.

He was already more than a hundred meders above the ground. Frantically avoiding the incoming Berbera attacks, he made his way up a grand staircase.

The intense battle hadn't lasted even ten minutes yet. Once he'd avoided capture for more than ten minutes, he decided he would give up without a fight. But for now, he had to keep pressing forward. It was his duty, his mission.

Every muscle burning, every sense screaming out in pain, he continued to evade every attack the second-tier-adventurer Berbera were throwing at him. Firebolt was proving to be an effective shield for the white rabbit as he recklessly poured all his energy into making it past the next obstacle alive.

Continuing to find openings in the net that the Level 3 Amazons had set for him, he saw visions of Haruhime's and Mikoto's faces sear themselves into his heart.

A trail of shattered stairs and walls in his wake, Bell's dramatic run persisted as even more Berbera joined the hunt.

"—Outta the waaay!!"

"?!"

Bell heard the scarily familiar voice rain down from above from the center of the tower as he rounded another corner. It was followed almost immediately by the sound of destruction coming his way.

Something big and sharp was spinning at him with high speed—a grand war ax. Bell bent backward just in time. The tip of the blade sliced through a few strands of hair just in front of his eyes.

The heavy weapon continued on its way, turning the railing, floor, and even the wall into a gaping hole that went down another four floors.

A cold chill ran up his spine as Bell looked at the spot that he had moved through less than a second ago, now nothing but shards of wood and other debris.

He knew right away, she was here.

“Phryne…!”

Bell looked up at the path from which the grand war ax had come. Indeed, her two-meder frame was not hard to spot.

The frog-like Amazon bearing the title Androctonus, the Man Slayer, looked down on her prey with a hungry grin on her thick lips.

That was when Bell recognized someone else standing next to her—a heroic-looking female warrior with long black hair: Aisha.

“Did you miss me so much you came baaack? Ahh, how sweeeet!”

Other Amazons handed Phryne two more grand battle-axes before she narrowed her eyes at Bell.

A heartbeat later, she kicked off the floor.

“—!”

“I’m comin’ for yoooou!”

Bell wasted no time in turning tail and taking off at full speed as Phryne plummeted toward him.

His escape route brought him into the main hallway, with doors to many rooms lining the walls. The impact of the gargantuan Amazon’s landing nearly knocked him off his feet. A shock wave littered with debris blasted out of the doorway he’d just run through.

“Let that toad handle the rabbit. All of you, to the thirtieth floor!”

Aisha’s sharp orders cracked through the air like a whip. However, Bell didn’t have time to listen due to the living wrecking ball closing in from behind.

Muscles searing in pain, the young human didn’t care which direction he went anymore, just as long as it was away from Phryne.

Eyes frantically scanning the hallway, he caught a glimpse of the cloudy skyline. A window, a path away from the mass of impending doom only a few meders away. He dashed—when a familiar high-speed whistling sound reached his ears. Another ax.

“?!”

“Goin’ somewherrre?”

The grand battle-ax was closing in with blinding speed.

Bell dove to the floor, protecting his neck and bracing for impact as the ridiculously large weapon destroyed everything in its path. Walls, floor, ceiling, and finally the window—chunks of jagged wood showered his body as the blade passed over him. He looked up and saw Orario's full skyline. The outer wall was gone.

There was no time to gawk at the damage.

A dark shadow fell over him where he lay.

"?!"

Phryne had closed the distance in a matter of seconds. The Amazon lifted her remaining grand battle-ax and brought it down.

Bell rolled to his left without a moment to spare. Another second later and the ax would have landed right between his shoulder blades.

Instead, the weapon plunged into the floor, causing the ground around her to cave in slightly. Phryne lost her balance for a moment. Bell desperately leaped up and thrust out his right arm toward the Amazon.

He didn't have the luxury of lining up a shot or worrying about his remaining Mind. Bell pulled his magic's trigger.

"FIREBOLT!!"

An electrified inferno burst forward from his palm.

It came together to form the sharp tip of the spear—that Phryne dodged with a quick backspin.

"No way…!"

Bell couldn't believe his eyes.

Firebolt—missed?

At that distance?!

The bolt continued down the hallway, scorching the walls as it went. Bell was absently stunned that someone as large as Phryne could evade something like that so easily. However, his would-be target was back on the offensive.

"Tricky piece of magic you got there!"

With that, her ax became a blur as she took swipe after swipe at Bell. It was all Bell could do in his panicked state to get out of the way.

Bell couldn't help but tremble at the knowledge that Phryne was fast enough to evade a lightning bolt with no warning. Her speed and agility didn't match her body type in the slightest.

It didn't make any sense.

Even as Bell evaded the weapon, the backlash from the air pressure cut into his skin. The true power of top-class adventurers hit home.

"You done yet?"

Phryne continued to take chunks out of the wide hallway as she forced Bell into the center of the tower.

The walls, ceiling, and floor bore deep gashes, the claw marks of a crazed beast. The expensive rugs and ornate magic-stone lamps were utterly destroyed by Phryne's onslaught. However, she was enjoying herself like a cat that refused to kill a dying mouse. Bell had become her toy.

Argonaut—Bell had no time to charge his Skill. He couldn't focus on it and fight against an opponent like her at the same time.

He would lose a limb the moment he thought about trying.

Phryne's overwhelming figure filled his quivering eyes. His ace in the hole, the one and only backup plan, wouldn't work. Only one option remained. Bell drew Ushiwakamaru-Nishiki to use with the Hestia Knife so he could attack—no, so he could defend—with a dual-blade style.

"KEHH!"

Shaking off his fear, he managed to guide a sideways swipe of the ax past his body.

With that came a series of un-dodgeable attacks, bringing forth visions of a different Amazon, the berserker Tiona, and her massive blade during his training on the city wall. Just as he did then, Bell took a defensive angle and slashed the incoming weapon out of the way.

High-pitched metallic screeches rang out every time the weapons collided. Short bursts of arcing sparks accompanied Ushiwakamaru-Nishiki's screams.

However, Bell was quickly overpowered and kicked farther down the hallway when he was most vulnerable between swipes.

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! So you can dance!!"

Phryne complimented the young human as he tumbled backward.

Flipping over two, three times, Bell rolled out of the hallway and into a larger chamber before finally coming to a stop.

Body covered in cuts, sweat, and bruises, Bell jumped back up to his feet.

What he saw next made his blood run cold.

"Miss Aisha…?!"

The chamber was completely filled with Berbera. Bell had rolled into a trap and was now surrounded on all sides.

The heroic Amazonian warrior stood tall, holding her favorite large wooden blade against her shoulder, her gaze firmly locked on the boy.

"…You did good, getting this far."

Aisha stood in front of a staircase leading to a higher floor, her voice loud enough to echo throughout the chamber.

A shock wave rumbled through the floorboards a second later. Phryne had arrived.

This particular chamber was decorated with fine artwork on the walls and ornate pillars framing each of the ceiling-high windows. With Aisha guarding the way up and Phryne preventing him from turning around, Bell had nowhere to run. That would've been bad enough without the countless other Amazons encircling him, bouncing their weapons against their shoulders with anticipation.

Oh shit…! Bell cursed to himself as he desperately looked for another way out. His mind raced almost to the point of bursting when suddenly:

"Back down, all of you."

A powerful voice came from the top of the stairwell.

Every set of eyes in the chamber snapped in that direction in surprise. Slowly but surely, the figure of a bronze-skinned goddess, boasting a peerless level of beauty, descended into the chamber with an oriental pipe in her hand. A sweet scent strong enough to drive the strongest of mortals mad wafted into the room before her. It enveloped Bell, seemed to burn him from his nose. His unblinking ruby-red eyes were drawn to her body like magnets.

The Goddess of Beauty Ishtar seduced any observer with her divine figure, but nonetheless, she was thoroughly pleased seeing Bell's reaction as she continued smoking.

"Wh-what's the meanin' of thisss, Lady Ishtar? Bargin' in?"

Phryne wasted no time voicing her displeasure with her goddess. Ishtar looked toward her towering follower as her assistant Tammuz made his way down the stairs behind her.

The frog-like Amazon's face turned a deep red, veins pulsing in her forehead.

"Did you not hear me, Phryne? I said back down."

Her emotionless black amethyst eyes flashed. Her words conveyed one simple message from her divine will: *obey.*

The corners of Phryne's wide mouth twitched.

It was the first time Bell had ever seen a hint of fear in her eyes.

"All of you, to the Floating Garden. Heads will roll if the Killing Stone Ritual fails again."

The completely overwhelmed Berbera sheathed their weapons. It didn't take them long to disappear from the chamber.

They filed out one by one. Aisha's eyelids sank as she looked at Ishtar for a moment before turning her back and following her kin out of the room. Just as she reached the door, she looked back over her shoulder at Bell, her long hair swaying.

Phryne clicked her tongue in frustration. She was the last one left. A few long seconds later, she put one foot in front of the other and left the chamber behind.

Bell breathed a momentary sigh of relief. His thoughts immediately went to Mikoto and Haruhime. He turned to leave, thinking to help them avoid more danger—when Tammuz scared him senseless.

The handsome, black-haired tan man's glare *overpowered* him.

"Little brat, I've come all this way to meet you myself. It's rude to turn your back on me."

Beads of sweat pouring down his face, Bell froze in place as he watched the Goddess of Beauty slowly descend the remaining stairs.

Ishtar approached Bell, a thin smile on her lips. Bell's body twitched back in her direction.

"Lady…Ishtar…"

She stood at his height, their eyes on the same level. Bell couldn't hide his bewilderment as the deity came even closer.

Two against one. No, gods and goddesses were physically weak and could not fight for themselves. In reality, it was one-on-one, Bell against Tammuz.

Bell's wide eyes jumped back and forth between the goddess and the human standing just behind her. It might have been a direct order from their goddess, but the boy still couldn't understand why Phryne and the others left without a word—that's how far his train of thought went before the goddess came to a stop.

"Most impressive, child of Hestia. You have more backbone than I thought, offering yourself up as a diversion and forcing your way in like that."

In reality, Bell's spine wouldn't stop trembling in her presence.

A seductive body, a voice that melted his ears, a sweet aroma, and alluring eyes.

Bell fell to the full force of divine beauty and immediately understood the reason the Amazons had given up so easily.

He had already been ensnared by a beauty that no mortal could resist.

The Amazons knew: Bell's fate had already been decided.

"Was it a woman's pull that brought you back here?"

The goddess commented on Bell's reckless valor, amethyst eyes sparkling as if they could see all.

Bell didn't know where to look, standing in the face of a goddess who was *too* beautiful.

An ornate golden crown, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and anklets decorated her body. The only cloth to be found on her perfectly proportioned tan figure was a strip of cloth covering the bare minimum of her breasts and stomach as well as another, slightly thicker strip wrapping around her lower back and thighs. Her long, braided black hair shone with the flickering light of the magic-stone lamps.

Any unprepared, unfortunate soul who happened to glimpse any part of her body ran the risk of being Charmed without warning.

That fear worked its way into Bell's mind. He blushed, trying to resist her erotic aura. All he could do was take a defensive stance.

"So, this is our second meeting. At first I doubted that vixen's sanity, taking an interest in you…But then again, I should reconsider. You have a nice face."

The goddess's smile broadened as she listened to Bell constantly clear his throat, apparently at a loss in the face of her allure.

The boy did his best to ignore shakes and tremors coursing through his body and did his best to force words out of his mouth.

"…Wh-why did you attack us in the Dungeon?"

He asked her the one thing that he could never figure out. To his surprise, she gave him a straight answer.

"You caught my attention and interest during the War Game. After that…it was to stick a thorn in the side of a certain vixen I can't stand."

Ishtar's words meant nothing to him. The look of confusion on Bell's face only caused her grin to grow even wider.

"Rejoice. I will Charm you and you will be mine."

A fresh wave of her enticing scent filled his nostrils. Her words sending more shivers down his spine, Bell took a step back.

However, a conversation with Haruhime's goddess was worth every second and he decided to press further.

Even if he didn't understand everything, this kind of opportunity might never come again.

Under the watchful gaze of Tammuz, Bell kept his distance from the Goddess of Beauty and continued asking questions.

"…Please, tell me."

"Oh?"

"Why…are you going to sacrifice Miss Haruhime?"

It took every ounce of willpower for Bell to string those words together. The enticing goddess's laughter filled the chamber a moment later.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! You can talk about another woman in front of me!"

"A-answer me, please!"

Ishtar calmed down enough to take a long draw from her pipe. She was pleasantly surprised by the sudden demanding tone in Bell's voice.

She rolled her shoulders a few times as her interest in the boy grew. Ishtar's mood was improving by the second as she started speaking again.

"Well, let's see. First, I bought Haruhime. I saved her from a life no better than livestock at the hands of those dirty men. In fact, I should be shown gratitude for treating her like a valuable treasure all these years."

The reality of Haruhime being sold like some object at the marketplace to become someone's plaything flustered Bell. He had thought she was "sold" in name only, that the reality could not be so cruel.

A goddess who had just happened to walk in on an auction, a still young renart girl. Drawn in by her natural beauty and an interest in her race, the goddess used her divine gifts to force the miserly merchants into selling her the young girl.

Ishtar enjoyed the flavor of the oriental pipe, taking another long drag as she told Bell about the first time she laid eyes on Haruhime.

"Her life was born anew, thanks to me…Children serve their parents, do they not?"

"That's…?"

"And you know, Bell Cranell? I don't think of this as killing

Haruhime. She will get her soul back as soon as the vixen falls. I'm only borrowing it for a short while."

What cheap logic! Bell screamed inside his head.

The chances of no shard being misplaced during a war with *Freya Familia* were extraordinarily slim.

Even after everything was over, the innocently smiling Haruhime whom Bell knew would never return.

Bell glared at Ishtar, his eyes shaking with rising anger.

"Let me just say this…Even if I did not seal Haruhime's soul, it is her destiny to be used by someone else. That is the *true meaning of her power.*"

"…!"

"Can you comprehend how I felt…the moment I gave that girl a Status? I shivered. The instant I realized that the possibility of finally toppling that wretched goddess was right in front of me!"

That wretched goddess—the profile of the Goddess of Beauty who led Orario's most powerful familia formed in Bell's mind.

Ishtar's jubilant voice echoed throughout the chamber, saying that the renart put the possibility to negate any and all divine expectations in the palm of her hand.

"Haruhime is my trump card! My chance to cast Freya into the abyss!"

Ishtar poured more and more energy into her voice, her excitement palpable. Bell fought back his anger enough to ask the next question.

"What makes you hate *Freya Familia* that much…?"

"What, you ask? Everything! I hate everything about her!"

Ishtar's eyes flashed with animosity for the first time. A rage-filled rant ensued.

"Men ignore me and flock to her instead, claiming that she is the most beautiful for absolutely no reason! You must be joking! How could that pig sow ever surpass me?! Have all men gone blind?!"

Ishtar roared at the floor, her jealousy rearing its ugly head in an explosion of hate.

Bell recoiled in fear of a divine passion that beings of Gekai could never fully understand.

Even Tammuz was careful not to draw the attention of his goddess.

"…B-but that doesn't give you the right to use Haruhime…!"

Bell fought to brace his buckling knees before willing the words out of his throat.

Ishtar seemed to get a handle on her rage and flashed another thin smile at the boy who had claimed that it was too cruel a fate.

"How insulting. If I were a goddess without blood or tears, I would have Charmed her into a faithful puppet long ago. But she is loyal; that fox listens to only my orders."

"That's only…"

"I have my own way of showing mercy. That pitiful girl was treated very well, you know."

Swish, swish. Ishtar spun her pipe between her fingers.

"Can't be helped if she felt uncomfortable from time to time. But I gave her beautiful clothing and delicious food…Not to mention I blessed her with many opportunities to know the joys of being a woman."

"…!!"

Bell could no longer contain the rage bursting forth from within his heart after hearing the way Ishtar described forcing Haruhime to sell her body and cooping her up in little more than a birdcage.

He even forgot that he was confronting a deity. His voice erupted in unbridled fury.

"WHY?! WHY DID YOU MAKE HER BECOME A PROSTITUTE?!"

"This is my familia. Everything I decide becomes law, rules that everyone must live by. It's common knowledge."

Bell's outburst sounded like nothing more than the cry of an ignorant child during a temper tantrum. Ishtar chuckled to herself, wondering what his problem was after coming all this way.

The one major downside to being a part of a familia was being subject to any rules they create.

They had no choice but to obey. The main reason that many average people chose not to receive Falna—outside of avoiding the inter-familia conflicts—was because they were scared of what they might have to do should their god demand it. Finding a deity with good character was a long shot at best.

That's what it truly meant to be a follower, a member of their family.

"So tell me, boy, why is it you avoid prostitutes? Bodies coming together in beautiful passion is sacred. It controls the wild aggression of men, allowing women to become a pillar of stability in this world.”

“Wha…?!”

“The difference in gender on Gekai is what allows new life to be born, for fertility to thrive. Sharing this bond with many different men is by no means unclean. Why can’t you children see this? It is beyond me.”

Gods and mortals had *very different* values.

This difference in the thinking of the deusdea came as a complete shock to Bell.

Perhaps it could be as she said. Just as the Guild had accepted the Pleasure Quarter’s activities, prostitutes might be an irreplaceable part of society.

That prostitutes weren’t abhorrent outcasts at all, that they were necessary.

But…!!

There had to be many who couldn’t live like that.

The image of a young girl staring out the window with longing eyes had been burned into Bell’s memory. He clenched his fist with all his might.

“Even so…Even if that’s true, there are people suffering because of it!”

Bell stood tall, squaring his shoulders at Ishtar as he unleashed a booming voice, demanding that she release Haruhime from the life of a prostitute, from being an object of destruction.

Unfortunately, Ishtar wasn’t the least bit moved by the zealous display.

“It will not happen.”

Bell’s plea could not reach the goddess of sensual desire. She couldn’t understand Haruhime’s pain.

Ishtar stared at him for a moment before pulling her pipe out from between her lips.

“Your selfishness and the truth will never align. Most of all, I have no interest in playing along.”

She frowned and snapped her fingers.

Tammuz moved with blinding speed and knocked Bell to the floor in the blink of an eye.

“Guwaah!”

He’d gotten so caught up in his conversation with the goddess that Bell had forgotten about her assistant. He let his guard down.

No, more than that—Tammuz was *fast*.

Bell never had time to resist. Now he was pinned to the floor and completely immobilized.

"He may not look it, but Tammuz is Level Four. You can't break his grip."

Ishtar gave a quick introduction to her familia's second in command.

Then she closed the distance between them—and started to disrobe.

"UWAHH?!"

The tension from a moment ago gone, Bell blushed and yelled in surprise.

"Eh—eh—EHHHHH!"

"Such a child. Hasn't Hestia taught you anything…? Ah, wait, she's one of the virgin goddesses, that's right."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why are you taking off your…?!"

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Facedown on the ground, Bell tried to hide his eyes under his shoulder. However, Tammuz took hold of his hair and forced his head back up.

Bell's wide eyes were greeted by a small pile of clothing and golden accessories at the feet of a completely nude goddess.

"Like I said, I'll make you *mine*."

Released from the cotton restraints, her breasts swayed from side to side as she stretched her supple, voluptuous body. Ishtar ran her fingers down all her seductive curves, finally stopping on her bulging bottom. Her moist, bronze skin was emitting the strongest erotic aura it had thus far that day.

A refined smile grew on her lips as she watched Bell's entire body blush bright red.

"I'll Charm you—'til your bones melt."

Her eyes had taken on a sadistic glint, dead set on stealing his body and soul.

Bell's face turned from dark red to light blue as her shadow fell over him.

* * *

Several buildings formed the palace of Belit Babili. Other than the palace for the goddess and the buildings where familia members lived and slept, there was one other massive structure within the main gates.

It was constructed out of white stone and stood at the back of the complex almost like an afterthought. However, it rivaled the main tower's palace in elegance and had been designed to resemble a ziggurat from the Ancient Times.

Constructed five years ago as a new brothel, the building's true purpose was to provide the stage for a certain ritual. It had been ready to fulfill its role three years ago when a certain prostitute destroyed a Killing Stone that had taken years to acquire. The structure had laid dormant ever since. Now it sat under the full moon, again waiting to fulfill its purpose.

The roof of this building was connected to the palace by one long stone bridge. Haruhime began her journey across it.

Despite standing forty stories above the ground, this bridge had no ceiling. Only a chest-high parapet prevented people from plummeting to the ground below. There was also no protection from the wind that gusted past. Haruhime held her hair in place as three Berbera assigned to escort her to the Floating Garden urged her forward.

“Move it, Haruhime!”

“R-right…”

Thud! The lead Amazon gave her an extra push, causing Haruhime to step on the front of her kimono.

The Berbera were completely focused on the night sky. Haruhime recovered her footing before she too looked up into the dark, starry abyss. A full, golden moon was staring back down at her from behind thinning cloud cover.

The light that will kill me.

—Haruhime said to herself in a silent voice.

Lowering her gaze to the bridge, she could clearly see the garden on the other side. Soft blue light rose from the center, as if beckoning her to come closer.

Face devoid of emotion, Haruhime continued forward.

Her pace quickened, as if there were people who could be saved if only she went through with it as quickly as possible.

“Weird girl…”

The Amazons stayed right beside her, looking down with thinly veiled disgust.

All three of them sneered at the girl who refused to put up a fight despite knowing that she was walking to her own doom. She had already given up. For brave and bold Amazons, her resignation to this fate came across as cowardice. That was the only thing more reprehensible than weakness to the proud warriors.

The Amazons kept their eyes on Haruhime as she walked a few paces in front of them. They let their guard down.

There was nowhere to hide on this one-way bridge that was completely exposed.

As this was the least likely place for an ambush to occur, the three women focused solely on carrying out their orders. Being able to see in every direction only increased their confidence. That’s why they failed to notice the presence of someone lurking *under the bridge*.

A human hand silently grabbed hold of the guard wall. Her black hair whipping behind her in the night, Mikoto flipped over it and landed behind the Amazons.

"—Huh?"

The last of the three was jerked backward by the throat before she was thrown up and over the side.

The screams of their fallen comrade alerted the other two Berbera, but the closest couldn't react in time, knocked off balance before she could defend herself. The human figure used a quick succession of grappling techniques to throw her over the side as well.

"Y-you?!"

The remaining Amazon shuddered as she listened to her falling comrades. Seeing that they fell from the left and right sides of the bridge, she took a central position and drew a longsword. The black shadow drew a crimson blade in response—but felt something strange in the air and ducked to the floor.

A strong gust of wind hit the bridge a moment later. Haruhime stumbled in the sudden push of air. The Amazon was rushing forward, her sword held high as she took the brunt of the wind. Next thing she knew, her back hit the guard wall.

"Wai—!" she started to say, but the black shadow had already closed the distance between them. Planting its foot, the shadow drove a heel into her chin.

"…Lady…Mikoto?"

The last of her escort gone from the bridge, Haruhime cautiously came to a stop and turned around. The black shadow, Mikoto, wasted no time in rushing to her side.

"Why are you here…?"

"To rescue you."

Mikoto answered the stunned renart's question with no hesitation in her voice.

The human girl's reflection in her large green eyes, Haruhime watched as Mikoto reached out and took hold of her hand.

"Let us escape together, Lady Haruhime. Quickly."

Time was of the essence. Mikoto didn't want to waste any of it exchanging words in such a vulnerable location.

However, Haruhime didn't move despite Mikoto's pull.

"Miss Mikoto…I'm fine, please save yourself."

"Wha…?"

Now it was Mikoto's turn to be stunned. Her grip going slack, Haruhime pulled away her hand.

"Why did you come, Lady Mikoto? Master Cranell, as well. I'm a burden, I would put you and your friends in danger. I thought everyone understood this."

"That was…!"

Mikoto had been forced to weigh the importance of Haruhime against her family just hours ago. Her heart still ached from having to make that decision.

Haruhime continued with an expression of sorrow on her face.

"Because of me, Lady Phryne and Lady Ishtar would never let you rest. My presence would put everyone you know in harm's way…That's what I am."

"Even so! Sir Bell swore to me that he would protect you!"

Frantically trying to wash away Haruhime's words with her own, Mikoto stepped forward and grabbed Haruhime's shoulders. The renart's eyes shot open in surprise.

"He will fight for you, become stronger for you, protect you! Those were his words!"

"That is because…Master Cranell is kind."

"That's not why! He's not fighting for you out of guilt or pity!"

Mikoto didn't allow Haruhime time to question Bell's resolve.

The girl looked down, desperate to avoid Mikoto's gaze.

"Lady Mikoto, I beg of you, leave me be…I am not worthy of this pain and suffering."

"Tell me why…why have you already given up? Your life is at stake!"

Tears flew from her eyes as Mikoto's fingers buried themselves in Haruhime's shoulders. The human's voice overpowered the wind that was making her hair whip to and fro.

Then.

Haruhime's lips fluttered. All the emotion, all the pain she'd kept bottled up over the years was threatening to spill over.

"I can't ask for help…"

The breeze carried her words off into the moonlit night. Mikoto didn't take them lying down.

"There is nothing to be frightened of!! Should Lady Haruhime ask, Sir Bell would never abandon you! He's not that kind of man!!"

"…"

"Lady Haruhime!"

Mikoto's voice jumped an octave higher in desperation. A heartbeat later—

Haruhime looked up.

"*You don't understand, Mikoto!*"

Tears poured down her cheeks, eyebrows standing on end.

The dam had fallen. Everything Haruhime had kept under wraps burst forward.

"…?!"

"Giving your body to someone you have no feelings for, selling it for money! Could you forgive yourself for doing that, Mikoto?"

A childlike tone had taken over Haruhime's voice. Even the politeness that had been drilled into her since birth was gone. That was Mikoto's first clue something big was coming, and it scared her.

"Look at me. I'm a prostitute!"

Mikoto's eyes shook as Haruhime's reality struck her like a blow to the head. She had no words to respond.

Haruhime shook her body left and right, cheeks soaked with tears.

She wrapped her arms around her chest after pulling her shoulders free from Mikoto's slackened grasp.

"I should ask him to help, is that what you're saying? I should ask him to fight for this soiled body, ask him to allow me to stay beside him after all I've done? All while knowing it would put him in danger?"

She looked at Mikoto with the eyes of a lost child.

Haruhime's eyes squeezed shut as she poured out more of her sadness.

"I can't! I just can't…!"

Her eyes closed, moonlight reflecting off her wet eyelashes as she looked back down at the floor.

Soft hiccups interrupted her cries, making Haruhime's shoulders jump every few seconds. The stones around her feet were dotted with fallen tears. Mikoto could only stand there like a frozen statue and watch her childhood friend lament.

If she had been in Haruhime's position, what then?

Would she be able to ask Ouka, Chigusa, Takemikazuchi for help?

As a prostitute, would she really ask to be saved?

Quite the opposite. She would ask them to look away.

As another woman, she couldn't refute Haruhime's words. She sympathized.

"…!!"

She chanced another look at Haruhime as both of them stood bathed in moonlight.

Filled with a feeling of powerlessness, Mikoto forgot where they were for one moment too long.

"—Open fire!"

They'd been discovered.

A bolt of lightning emerged from the main tower, searing the night air. It hit Mikoto directly in her back.

"GUAH!"

Her body shook as the bolt ripped through her shoulder.

A magic sword.

More Berbera had appeared from the palace. The forward ranks brandished several magical weapons.

Haruhime watched in horror as her friend's body spasmed and stumbled toward the guard wall.

"Mikoto!"

Haruhime reached out to help her. Another bolt made contact with Mikoto's side.

The human girl managed to block the fatal blow with her crimson dagger, but the impact was enough to knock her off the bridge.

Unable to grab hold of Haruhime's outstretched hand, Mikoto fell through the air.

"AAHHH…!!"

Haruhime hid her face with both hands, a fresh wave of tears flowing from her eyes as she collapsed to her knees.

Stricken with guilt, she rocked back and forth, whispering, "Sorry," over and over.

"…!"

Meanwhile, a still-plummeting Mikoto gritted her teeth and grabbed her injured shoulder.

The bridge where she left her friend behind shrank in the distance.

"Failure…!"

She reached into the item pouch with her other hand and withdrew a flare.

As much as it pained her to do it, she flipped the trigger and let it fly—a spray of red sparks arced over Belit Babili.

* * *

"—Can't you open your eyes?!"

Ishtar's rage was undeniable.

And all of it was targeted at the boy, Bell, who was currently pinned to the ground by her assistant Tammuz.

Eyes clenched shut, the bright-red boy wasn't listening.

"I c-c-c-c-can't! Please put on some clothes!"

Bell screamed at the top of his lungs as he thrashed about, trying to break out of the stranglehold. "Hold still!" snarled Tammuz in frustration that he couldn't keep a Level 3 adventurer completely still. Only when Ishtar added her own body weight did the panicked rabbit fall in line.

The boy still refused to look at her. It was time to change her strategy.

Just what the hell is going on with this one…?

The boy shouldn't have a choice. Whether or not he opened his eyes, the very fact that Ishtar had taken an interest should have Charmed him on the spot. That's the way it worked.

Her beauty in their eyes, her smell overwhelming their nostrils, her voice melting in their ears, the sensation of her skin on theirs—none of the senses was safe from her allure. She could use any one of them to turn an army of ten thousand into her slaves. She didn't even have to touch them. It should all be over on eye contact. No one should be able to resist her gaze.

Yet the boy beneath her had resisted at every turn. Not only was it strange, but his innocent reaction was making her embarrassed.

"Why isn't he being Charmed?!"

Tammuz was taken aback by his goddess's fit of rage.

While the Goddess of Beauty's Charm was similar to a monster's poison, even the Advanced Ability Immunity shouldn't be able to block it.

Ishtar's pride was reeling. She bit her lip and menacingly eyed the boy's back.

"Tammuz, strip him!"

"U-understood!"

Without armor, only a thin layer of cloth hid his back from sight. Tammuz did as he was told and placed his hand on Bell's back.

The white-haired boy tried to struggle, but his inner shirt was ripped to shreds in the blink of an eye.

His Status was exposed.

Even though the black hieroglyphs were hard to read, there was no lock protecting the information. Ishtar raised an eyebrow, surprised that her picking skills would not be necessary before leaning in for a closer look.

A moment later, she was speechless.

Bell Cranell

Level Three

Strength: I 94 Defense: H 144 Dexterity: I 95 Agility: G 299 Magic: I 78

Luck: H Immunity: I

Magic

(Firebolt)

- Swift-Strike Magic

Skills

(Learis Freese)

- rapid growth
- continued desire results in continued growth
- stronger desire results in stronger growth

(Argonaut)

- charges automatically with active action

“What in the—”

While his Luck ability got her attention at first, Ishtar couldn’t take her eyes off a specific Skill the moment she deciphered the sloppy handwriting.

Learis Freese.

A yet undocumented Rare Skill that affected growth rate.

Ishtar couldn’t believe it.

If the information written in his Status was to be believed…The goddess froze in awe of the mortal boy struggling under her weight.

He possessed an immensely strong will, powerful enough to create Skills.

A will powerful enough to force his own growth out of sheer desire.

A pure, yet one-track mind that came around once in a millennium at most.

Learis Freese’s unintended side effect: a goddess’s Charm had no effect on him!

“A-are you an idiot?!”

Ishtar’s voice exploded from her throat the moment she connected the dots and realized the truth.

Ishtar was devastated and completely lost her composure once she learned the secret of a boy too pure to be true.

All people of Gekai, including monsters and even the gods, shouldn’t have the power to escape the Charm of the Goddess of Beauty. And yet, here was one human boy with the ability to nullify it, canceling out the overwhelming power at her command.

Inconceivable. Absolute nonsense.

Ishtar leaned back, her amethyst eyes alight with a new flame.

“∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼∼!”

She glared at the white rabbit who still wouldn’t obey her. The goddess’s entire body shook with a mixture of anger and humiliation.

Tammuz had never seen his goddess lose her poise, not to this extent. He looked up from Bell, shaking in fear.

“Ha-pwaah!”

“AH!”

That was the window that Bell needed to break free from the young man’s stranglehold.

Noises similar to his own goddess, Hestia, escaped Bell as he rolled away and was back on his feet before either of his captors could react.

He dashed past Ishtar as Tammuz realized what had just transpired. Bell chanced a glance over his shoulder as he made a break through the middle of the room toward the closest window.

Not worried about minor details, Bell threw himself through the glass and into the night air.

“The rabbit escaped! Capture him, now!”

Tammuz ran to the window, leaned out, and yelled to the Berbera stationed below. Ishtar, who had lost all sense of calm, screamed at the top of her lungs.

"That boy cannot be allowed to get away! Bring him to me, I don't care how!"

Tammuz didn't waste a moment following his enraged goddess's order. Forgetting to help her get dressed, the young human left the chamber and raced down the stairs.

Ishtar donned her garments with her own hands before ascending the other staircase.

"Make a fool of me, will you…?"

As a Goddess of Beauty, she wouldn't allow the existence of anything that could not be bent to her will.

Envisioning the boy's neck between her fingers, Ishtar snapped her oriental pipe in half.

◆

Bell fell from the thirtieth story of the palace.

"GAHH!"

His body hit the wall of the tower and more window awnings than he could count before he managed to catch the inside of an open window with his right hand.

Despite the jarring end to his descent, Bell still had enough strength in his arm to pull himself into the room.

"Wuh—WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

A group of gorgeous young men and women screamed at the unexpected intruder; all the helpless servants scattered, yelling at the top of their lungs. Bell's eyes met those of the young animal person. "S-sorry!" He apologized out of reflex.

"Ah, I apologize…!"

Bell's Status was still out in the open for anyone to see. Pulling the rest of his black inner shirt off his body, he helped himself to one of the shirts already in the room, a servant's shirt. Stuffing his head into the garment, Bell flew out the door and into the hallway.

"Miss Mikoto, Miss Haruhime…!"

He took the last remaining potion out of his leg holster and downed it in one gulp.

The voices of his pursuers came from above and below. Bell searched for the path that would lead to his friends.

That's when he saw them.

Bang! The sound of an explosion drew his attention outside.

"Red sparks…It didn't work?"

Red light was coming through all the outside windows. With wide eyes, the boy watched the light flash and fade.

It came from behind the palace—a red light that told him Haruhime was still in danger.

He ran to the closest window, looking skyward in disbelief.

However…

"—Not yet!"

He kicked off the floor at full speed.

It wasn't over yet, and Mikoto would never give up!

Bell set his sights on the Floating Garden to carry out their backup plan: to destroy the Killing Stone.

"There's still a chance…!"

—At that exact moment, Mikoto looked at the Floating Garden with determination in her eyes. She'd made an emergency landing on the outside wall of the palace but was back on her feet.

Nothing had been set in stone, and Bell would never give up!

She bit down on the sleeve of her black kimono and tore off strips of fabric. Mikoto wrapped them around her injured shoulder while on the run, eyes completely focused on her destination.

Their rescue operation was becoming a matter of life and death.

◆

The roof of the ziggurat—the Floating Garden.

Several towers extended well beyond its forty-story height to protect it. The palace reached farther into the sky just beside it. Each stone block that made up the ground of the wide building had been meticulously placed to be exactly level and to have absolutely no cracks between each slab.

The stone slabs that made up the Floating Garden were a synthesized hybrid of a black ore called darubu mixed with a large amount of lunatic light stones. Each of them reacted to the moonlight shining down from above by releasing a steady stream of soft pale-blue light that spread across the surface like a floating carpet.

"Samira, everything ready yeeet?"

"Yeah, can't you use your eyes? All that's left is waitin' for the moon to get in position."

Half of *Ishtar Familia*'s Berbera, including almost all the members Level 3 and higher, had gathered in the Floating Garden.

Over one hundred Amazons were walking barefoot across the pale, bluish-white slate, congregating in the center. Phryne walked up to the one in charge of overseeing the preparations for the ritual, Samira. The gray-haired Amazon jerked her chin toward the center.

There, in the middle of the solemn, dreamlike Floating Garden, stood three tall and thin stone pillars, arranged in a triangular formation around an altar.

The stone altar itself glowed even brighter than the stone slabs of the roof. Its light reacted with the pillars, breaking off into sparkling streams as it mixed with the moonlight.

The garden and the altar were designed to serve one purpose: increase the power of the Killing Stone. There was a risk of splitting the soul should the stone be used by itself. With this much energy to draw from, the Killing Stone would be able to seal the soul in its entirety.

Phryne's eyes narrowed as she grinned. Samira stood next to her, watching the sky.

A great deal of the clouds had disappeared. An unobstructed night sky filled with stars and a stunning full moon spread out over the Floating Garden.

All the Amazons were waiting for one thing—for the light emanating from the altar to turn from light blue to dark red. Then the ritual could begin.

"Haruhimeee! Stop loafin' around and get to the altarrr!"

Phryne turned away from the altar as her booming voice filled the air.

The mass of Amazons stepped aside to make way. A renart girl dressed in a gorgeous red kimono quietly put one foot in front of the other as she silently marched toward the front.

With the exception of the whites of her green eyes being red, her face was expressionless. She kept her gaze fixed on the blue light rising from the stone beneath her feet. There was no personality or emotion in her demeanor; she was like a doll walking on a cloud.

"…"

The Amazons made many faces at her as she passed. Aisha watched Haruhime's approach and opened her mouth just before the renart walked in front of her. However, no sound came out.

Haruhime briefly looked up in her direction, a weak smile in her eyes as if she was trying to convey something to Aisha. But the Amazon closed her mouth, hands shaking as the young girl passed by.

Haruhime arrived at the altar and climbed to the top.

"Kneel here."

"Yes…"

She placed her knees on top of the center of the glowing stone as ordered.

Several chains fit with shackles hung from the tall pillars surrounding the altar. In the next few moments, they were attached to her wrists, ankles, waist, and neck.

It was said that the renart experienced extreme pain when their soul was being transferred from their body to the Killing Stone during the ritual. These chains were to prevent Haruhime from thrashing wildly when the time came.

"…"

On her knees and in chains, Haruhime truly looked like a maiden about to be sacrificed to a deity, or at the very least the centerpiece to some ancient ceremony. Even the Amazons surrounding the altar lost themselves in the poignant beauty of the scene.

"With this, we can finally fight against *Freya Familia*."

From the opposite side of the Floating Garden came a sight that brought grins of anticipation to their lips: the Killing Stone had arrived.

The fist-size, bloodred crystal had been attached to the end of the hilt of a ceremonial longsword.

Its blade would pierce Haruhime's body and give the stone direct access to her magical energy. It would become the bridge her soul would travel across as it was sealed inside the Killing Stone. The blade itself glistened in the moonlight while the stone on its hilt released an ominous red glow.

Haruhime felt a twinge of fear the moment the weapon came into view. She quickly closed her eyes, shook her head, and looked up at the stars.

Her eyes were greeted by countless sparkles of light behind a golden moon.

The light that would kill her.

Then again, it would be the light that would save her from the pain and suffering in this world.

Illuminated by a dazzling moonbeam, Haruhime let her head drop.

There were no tears. It was her heart that cried. But she didn't let it show.

Her tiny body held in all the sadness, pain, happiness, and regret.

All the memories she'd made in the past few days, meeting that boy and reuniting with that girl, everything was packed tightly together and hidden away.

Her mind a blank slate, Haruhime slowly closed her eyes.

"—The enemy is attacking!"

A shrill voice reached her ears a moment later.

Haruhime's eyes shot open as her head sprang up. The intense sounds of weapons crashing against one another echoed from the entrance bridge that connected to the Floating Garden.

What appeared was a young girl with long black hair tied into a ponytail, charging into the ranks of Amazons.

"Lady Haruhime—!"

Mikoto jumped over the guards at the gate leading to the Floating Gardens and raced toward the altar.

The guards were already alerted to her presence; trying to hide was meaningless at this point. She drew in a deep breath of air and shouted loud enough for the girl chained to the glowing stone to know she was there.

"Again?!"

The Amazons around the altar grabbed their weapons and charged toward the oncoming Mikoto.

However, they came to a stop about thirty meders in front of the altar. Mikoto, already badly injured, stopped in the face of the wall of Amazonian muscle and steel. All the guards she'd snuck past caught up behind her and fanned out. Mikoto was now completely surrounded.

"Seriously, you came here alone?!"

Samira smiled as if she'd taken a liking to the brave and reckless human.

The rest of the Berbera soon donned the same grin, eager to see what was about to unfold.

"Hey Haruhime, your hero is here!"

Samira looked over her shoulder at the girl in chains. What color remained in Haruhime's face drained in the blink of an eye.

Her body tried to jump into action but was quickly held back by the chains.

"Why…WHY?! Leave, now, Lady Mikoto!"

The rattling chains accented Haruhime's screams as she struggled against them.

Despite being rejected before, Mikoto appeared before her once again. The human girl looked up at her with an awe-inspiring gaze.

"That's impossible, Lady Haruhime. No matter how many times you refuse me, I will do what I have always done since our childhood. I will take you outside."

Memories of days long past in their hometown in the Far East.

She had told them everyone would get angry, that they should just let her be, so many times. But they ignored her pleas, not giving any pause to being labeled delinquents, and still came to take her out of her family's manor.

Nothing had changed. Mikoto was the same as ever and Haruhime knew that look in her eyes. The emotions that had been so tightly confined within the renart broke free once again as her eyes glistened with tears.

"You lookin' pretty cool right about now."

The gray-haired Amazon Samira watched Mikoto's dramatic entrance and her long-distance reunion with Haruhime with delight.

"Hey, Phryne, Aisha. Let me have her!"

She turned to face the commander and the heart and soul of the Berbera, practically the captain of their familia.

"You two already had time to play! Let me have a turn!"

"…Ge-ge-ge-ge-geh, have some fuuun. We got time anyway."

Phryne glanced at the moon before a vulgar laugh rushed forth from her lips.

Samira had been tasked with overseeing the ritual preparations and hadn't been part of the rabbit hunt. Phryne didn't see any problem with letting her have her way. "Yeayuh!" Samira clapped her hands together in excitement.

Aisha made no attempt to stop her and watched on in silence.

“Please! Please stop this! Lady Phryne, Lady Aisha!”

Paying no attention to Haruhime’s cries in the distance, Samira stepped out of the ring of Amazons encircling Mikoto.

“That’s how it is, so humor me. Tell you what, you beat me… and I might listen to what you have to say.”

“…”

Already feeling the eyes of all the Berbera squarely on her, Mikoto turned to face her opponent.

A tenacious grin grew on Samira’s face. Mikoto knew that she had no choice but to play along.

This situation might even work to her advantage. At the very least, it would allow her to buy time for Bell to arrive, or even open a path for him to the altar. Mikoto’s mind was set.

The human stayed silent as she withdrew Ushiwakamaru, the blade she had borrowed from him. She held out the weapon in front of her, holding it backhanded in a defensive stance.

The corner of Samira’s lips turned upward, elated that her challenge had been accepted. She chose not to use any weapons at all and stared down Mikoto as she stretched her arms and legs.

They stood not too far away from the entrance to the stone bridge. The bloodthirsty Amazons lined up shoulder to shoulder, creating a ring around the combatants. Their battle started with the utterance of a simple phrase:

“Here I come!”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than Samira had launched herself toward Mikoto in a full-frontal assault.

“—”

The oncoming attack was too fast for Mikoto to block or counter, so she was forced to focus completely on dodging the first strike.

“!”

The Amazon’s large fist passed just in front of her eyes as she got her head out of the way in the nick of time.

But that left-handed jab was only a feint. Samira turned that momentum downward, placing her left hand on the ground and sweeping her legs upward.

“Guh!”

Mikoto caught a glimpse of Samira’s right heel in time to block the attack with Ushiwakamaru.

Her arms went numb as if getting hit by the blunt end of a steel pipe. A shock wave of pain tore through her body, knocking her off balance. Samira wasted no time pressing her advantage.

"Just like that, try and keep up!"

A barrage of fists and feet rained down on Mikoto.

Each one of the copper-colored streaks that was coming at Mikoto had enough power to send her reeling. The human focused everything she had on getting far enough out of the path of each strike that her Defense could withstand the blow if she couldn't dodge it completely. No wasted motion, no room for error.

—As I expected, Level 3.

Her opponent's ash-gray hair shook back and forth, her minimal clothing holding tight to her body as she moved. Samira's overwhelming dance of death proved to Mikoto what she had already suspected: There was a large gap between her own Level 2 Status and the Amazon's. She had no way to overcome her opponent's overwhelmingly superior power, combat style, and footwork.

How many of the Berbera surrounding her were just as strong as Samira? Their yells seemed distant to her as that realization set in. Sensing the fear creeping into her heart, Mikoto shook it off and regained her calm center.

She and Bell had already decided that they would save Haruhime no matter how insurmountable the odds appeared.

"Hiiiya!"

"Hah! Not bad!"

Samira blocked Mikoto's first counterattack with her right arm.

She smiled as if enjoying the pain shooting through her arm, after taking the full force of Mikoto's kick. Then she returned the favor.

"UgAHH!"

Mikoto went airborne.

Ushiwakamaru knocked from her grasp on impact, Mikoto watched the blade land at the feet of their audience while on her back in the middle of the ring. Rolling over her shoulder to face forward, her eyes opened wide as Samira charged her once again.

"You done?!"

Mikoto's eyes narrowed as the Amazon's right fist came hurtling toward her face.

Now or never! Mikoto grabbed ahold of the fist and guided it over her shoulder—into a throwing position.

“?!”

The hollering Amazons and Samira herself took notice.

A judo-style arm throw. Another combat style instilled in her by Takemikazuchi—Mikoto seized her chance to use one of these techniques.

Monsters in the Dungeon came in all shapes and sizes, making her judo training practically useless. However, this Far Eastern style was extremely useful for manipulating the bodies of human opponents.

These techniques were designed to help take down larger, stronger fighters. She was on the verge of accomplishing something grand.

Mikoto exhaled with all her might, her muscles contracting at full power to bring Samira down onto the stone surface.

“Hey, nice!”

But Samira had other ideas.

Commenting on her technique in mid-throw, she casually twisted her right arm and broke free.

“!”

The throw was a mere heartbeat away from being completed. Now free, the Amazon grabbed onto Mikoto’s body with both hands—and threw her.

“Wha?!”

Just before the Amazon’s back hit the stone floor, Mikoto’s eyes registered two flashes of tan skin go under her left arm and around her neck. The next thing she knew, Mikoto had been forced skyward by the sheer muscle of her opponent. “Ow!” yelled Samira in pain as her rear end landed squarely on the hard surface. At the same time, Mikoto had been thrown all the way to the ring of Amazons.

The closest one watched with glee and delivered a devastating roundhouse kick that sent Mikoto tumbling back into the center.

“Was that one of those Far East moves? That was pretty.”

With that, Samira closed the distance between her and Mikoto in the blink of an eye.

The human girl was still on her back, reeling from the last hit. Samira took a more playful approach to her next barrage of attacks, kicking Mikoto like she was trying to juggle a soccer ball with her feet.

“GUAH!”

"Show me more if you got 'em!"

Samira's last kick sent the girl flying. Mikoto bounced once before finally managing to regain her feet.

However, that just opened her up to the second-tier adventurer's merciless fists.

Mikoto's body jerked left and right as her shoulders, stomach, and cheeks all took direct hits. Droplets of her blood flew with each blow, cutting dark splashes into the pale-blue light emanating from the stone floor. Samira's beastly smile grew. In her eyes, Mikoto was nothing but a toy that had some hidden features. She would stop at nothing to see them.

Techniques were useless.

Mikoto's thoughts were a mess. The only thing that came through loud and clear was awestruck horror at Samira's wild yet perfected battle style.

The Amazon was a living, breathing weapon. Years of experience culminated in a body that could react on instinct, knew how to move without thinking. Each blow that connected delivered more than just physical pain, they were direct shots to her confidence and pride. Each impact was also the sound of her breaking down within.

Her talent and skill were outmatched.

Mikoto's knees went weak as each new wave of attacks showed her just how much distance there was between her abilities and those of a second-tier adventurer.

"Lady Mikoto! MIKOTO!"

Haruhime's screams had finally reached her.

"!!"

Mikoto's eyelids flew open.

The human girl stood up strong, light back in her eyes.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Seriously, are you Level Two?"

Clearly impressed that Mikoto had taken the brunt of her full assault and remained standing, Samira joyfully complimented her fighting spirit.

Another round of fists, knees, and elbows slammed into the bruised and bloody Mikoto. However, she now had a good understanding of her opponent's attack pattern and did her best to protect herself and avoid a fatal blow.

She even tried some more of her techniques when a window presented itself. Unfortunately, the ash-gray-haired Amazon could sense when something was coming and always managed to evade.

Winning as an adventurer is impossible!!

Mikoto screamed inside her mind as her body just barely avoided an elbow that would have broken her shoulder.

As long as they remained on an even playing field, there was no way for Mikoto to gain the upper hand. Coming to this realization, Mikoto threw her pride, compassion, and battle etiquette on the back burner.

"Listen well, Mikoto. Ninjutsu is…dirty."

Takemikazuchi's voice popped into her mind.

"Sneak attacks, ambushes, traps…A ninja uses every option, any means to reach their goal."

The god she loved and respected had said this with a stern face.

"So, to be blunt, someone as straightforward and honest as yourself might not have much use for it."

While he wasn't eager to teach her the techniques, the deity explained his reasoning.

"True ninjas act out of devotion. Be it to a lord they must protect or someone very important to them."

Then Takemikazuchi smiled.

"Should that someone be in mortal danger—then even someone as straightforward and serious as you can become a ninja of legendary proportions."

Devotion.

Her devotion was to Haruhime.

If it's to save her, then any method—!

Samira's last kick caught her under the chin. Even while spinning in midair, Mikoto reached for her item pouch, took something out, and threw it onto the floor.

"Huh—smoke?!"

"A smoke bomb!"

Samira and the surrounding Amazons took a step back in surprise as a thick gray gas spewed into the air.

Along with a flash grenade, it was one of the items that Mikoto had taken from the vault. The Berbera were more surprised that one of their own items had been used against them than its actual appearance on the battlefield.

The cloud overtook Mikoto and Samira in the middle of the ring, completely hiding them from view.

"Where is she?!"

A few of the Berbera retreated to protect the altar. Meanwhile, Samira's head was on a swivel as she searched for Mikoto within the cloud. Her own senses, a second-tier adventurer's enhanced sight and hearing, couldn't find the human. For the first time, her air of confidence was gone.

A black shadow appeared behind her a moment later.

"—Got you!"

A crazed grin appeared on her lips as Samira jumped high into the air and brought her heel down on top of the shadow.

Her reflexes had been spot-on, delivering an accurate blow from a nearly blind angle at blazing speed. However, her grin was gone and eyes opened wide in shock.

"Cloth?!"

Her foot had made contact with the short robe that Mikoto had been wearing as a shirt.

Substitution technique—*Utsusemi*.

Then Mikoto approached her opponent in earnest from behind.

"!"

She came in high, high enough to wrap her thighs around Samira's head.

Blocking her opponent's vision, Mikoto roared with all her might as she thrust her body back in the other direction.

"—HHHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Full-Moon Throw—*Mikazuchi*.

Samira was lifted off her feet. Her body arced through the smoke cloud with her head pinned between Mikoto's knees. *BAM!!* It made contact with the stone floor in the blink of an eye.

"GUAH!"

The sound blasted through the air, the impact strong enough to break the stone slab and leave Samira's head buried under its surface.

"Haa…haa…!"

Mikoto gasped for breath as Samira's body fell limp to the ground beside her.

That was the scene that the Amazons were greeted by the moment the smoke cleared. There wasn't a sound to be heard.

Her shirt gone, only the fabric wrapped around her chest protected Mikoto's dignity as she struggled to climb to her feet. However, her fighting spirit hadn't left her eyes despite all the injuries she'd sustained. That got the attention of all the Berbera.

"…Ge-ge-ge-ge-geh. Quite the fighter, aren't you."

Mikoto scanned the ring, shoulders going up and down as she waited for her next opponent.

"Such a waaaste."

"…?"

Mikoto turned to look at the possessor of the deep, croaking voice: the Amazon commander, Phryne.

The large face grinned. Aisha, who had been silent up to this point, opened her mouth to speak. But just before she could…

"This ain't over."

From behind.

More specifically, from below.

"

One girl locked in torment as the sound of fist to flesh created a melody of pain in the background. Phryne watched everything unfold with glee…when another Amazon appeared from the stone bridge with a message. The newcomer came right up to Phryne and whispered in her ear.

"Ahhnn……The bunny's on the looose?"

"Y-yes."

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! Looks like Lady Ishtar ain't so tough."

Phryne couldn't contain her laughter at the news. Her voice grew so loud that Samira's barrage was little more than background noise.

Insulting her goddess over and over, she opened her wide mouth and took in a deep breath.

"—Little Rookie, you're watchin' us right now, aren't you? Better hurry up, your precious friend can't take much morrre!"

The surrounding Amazons had to shield their ears as Phryne's voice erupted like a volcano. The massive woman's eyes went from tower to tower, searching every corner of the Floating Garden.

Phryne was absolutely sure that the boy would come to rescue Haruhime after escaping from Ishtar's grasp.

"…"

—And she was right.

Five minutes after Mikoto, Bell had finally arrived at the Floating Garden.

He'd given up on finding a safe route inside the tower that connected to the stone bridge, opting instead to take advantage of the ziggurat's intricate carvings to scale the outside wall all the way to the top.

Bell hid himself behind one of the towers surrounding the Floating Garden. Mikoto was following their plan to the letter, drawing the attention of as many Amazons as possible to give him an opening to destroy the Killing Stone—but he couldn't ignore her once he got a glimpse of her horrible condition. He stood at another crossroads, hands tightening into fists.

I can't take it! His mind was set. Just when he was about to jump in…

"SIR BELL!"

Mikoto's scream stopped him in his tracks.

He wasn't the only one. Every set of eyes in the garden was suddenly locked on the bloodied human. Arms limp at her sides, Mikoto stood up to her full height and took a step forward. Slowly but surely, her hands made fists.

Mikoto's voice echoed throughout the garden long after she fell silent, as if searching for the boy she knew had to be here. Resolute eyes burning, she turned her shoulders to face Samira once again.

"Ohh…But what are we gonna do about this now?"

Samira kicked high, the heel of her foot colliding with Mikoto's collarbone. She bent backward but didn't lose her balance.

Gritting her teeth, Mikoto prepared for the next merciless attack.

"There ain't no time left!"

The girl's eyes shot open as the Amazon's fist dug into her gut.

Indeed, the tips of soft blue light emanating from the stones beneath their feet were starting to get a red tint.

The altar at the center of the Floating Garden was also changing. The lunatic light in the stone was reacting to the full moon almost directly above, pulsing as if calling out to a long-lost brother. Streaks of red light leaped out from the blue and toward the sky.

It wasn't long before Haruhime was chained inside the eye of a crimson vortex reaching out toward the moon far above.

"Sharay. When the time is right, do herrr."

Phryne's eyes narrowed in anticipation before issuing the order to an Amazon standing at the base of the altar.

The warrior named Sharay nodded, the ceremonial longsword in her grip. The Killing Stone glowed with the same ominous light emitting from the altar.

Aisha saw all this transpire and turned her right foot toward Haruhime.

"You stay right therrre."

"…"

Phryne's massive frame blocked Aisha's path.

Two Amazons glaring daggers at each other and one white-haired boy—his eyes filled with disbelief.

Just out of their view was Mikoto, still absorbing punch after punch from Samira.

"…Go beyond…"

Mikoto whispered with a spark of determination in her dark-purple eyes.

"…the enemy's…"

Samira was enjoying the rush of her assured victory so much that Mikoto's voice never reached her ears.

"…expectations."

Mikoto let her voice fade out.

Slipping past one of Samira's punches, Mikoto wrapped her limp arms around her opponent's chest and held on with everything she had left.

"Haah?"

The Amazon sounded vaguely annoyed that her toy wanted a hug rather than to try to fight back.

Mikoto didn't pay attention to her and started *casting*.

"*Fear, strong and winding—*"

Samira smirked at the human girl, who was trying to cast magic while draped over her shoulder.

"I get it, I know how you feel. But don'cha think using magic now is a bit, I don't know, amateurish?"

Magic—an ace in the hole that could turn the tables of battle and bring anyone back from the brink of demise.

However, Mikoto's choice under the circumstances disappointed Samira to no end.

"You know, I saw your magic in the War Game. It's a kick-ass spell, but the trigger takes forever!"

"GAH!"

Samira drilled her elbow into Mikoto's defenseless ribs in an effort to show her how pointless the attempt really was.

"*I call upon the god…the destroyer of any, and all for…*"

Even still, Mikoto did not stop casting her spell between grunts of pain and staggered breaths.

"Enough of this, you're boring me. Just cut it out, will you?"

"GuWAH!"

A second hit, a third. Samira's elbow hit harder and harder each time.

Mikoto made no attempt to pull away or dodge the blows as she continued to push her magical energy forward.

The Amazons watching the pitiful spectacle just laughed or shook their heads in discontent. Samira had to find some way to enjoy the rest of this fight as the blue cloud beneath her feet became redder with each passing moment. She decided to see how many blows it would take to knock the human off her—when something clicked in her mind.

"H-hey…You wouldn't seriously…"

Mikoto's magical energy was beginning to overflow.

Like a bowl that couldn't hold any more water, like a flooded river that wouldn't obey its banks, a storm had been let loose.

The small body could no longer handle the surging magical energy coursing through it.

"*Guidance from…the heavens…*"

Mikoto's mind drifted further and further into darkness even as the trigger spell continued to pass through her lips.

"—Watch your opponent, learn their habits, their expectations. And then go beyond them. All ninjas must think this way to succeed."

Takemikazuchi's voice came to her as her blood-caked body went beyond its physical limit, her consciousness on the verge of shutting down.

He had told her that all the techniques were just for show.

"*Grant this trivial body…*"

He had tried to convey one truth through his teachings:

The reason why he, as a god, considered ninjutsu to be dirty.

"A ninja learns the way the enemy thinks—and goes a step further."

Betray the enemy's expectations, *an unthinkable sneak attack*.

"*…divine, power beyond power…!!*"

The God of Combat's words ringing through her heart, Mikoto pushed her magical energy *even harder*.

"No, you wouldn't dare—!"

Samira's shrill voice was laced with unmistakable fear.

But it was too late. The energy was free.

It coursed through her muscles, desperately searching for an exit, like too much water in a thin pipe.

"O-OFF!! GET OFF MEEEEEEEEEE!"

Mikoto had converted all her Mind into magical energy without completing the trigger spell. This caused a chain reaction that would inevitably lead to an explosion.

Desperation overtook Samira as she assaulted the girl hanging onto her chest with all her might, panic in her bloodshot eyes.

More of Mikoto's vulnerable ribs cracked with each hit, but her grip didn't falter.

Quite the opposite. Despite her searing headache and the most physical pain she'd ever experienced, a bloody smile appeared on Mikoto's lips.

"All of you! Get this thing OFF MEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

No matter how many times she struck her, no matter how hard she thrashed around, Samira couldn't break free and finally sought help. The Berbera responded immediately, charging in with weapons drawn—all too late.

The magical energy had found its exit and started to squeal like a boiling teapot.

Mikoto's body became the epicenter of a deafening explosion that enveloped the entirety of the Floating Garden.

Samira, Phryne, Aisha, the Berbera, Haruhime, and Bell.

All sets of eyes flew open as rampaging magical energy overtook them.

"*Protect, purifying light*

were lucky enough to be outside the blast radius—still felt the intense burst of energy wash over them. Even Haruhime, still chained to the altar, felt the heat on her skin.

Echoes of the blast kept bouncing around the wide-open garden.

“

He heard.

The words of the girl who'd put her life on the line, and the yearning within them, reached him.

Bell emerged from his hiding place the instant the shock wave blew past and committed every muscle, every tendon, to reaching the altar one heartbeat sooner.

He had to break through the line of Amazons in his way.

“

Faster.

Slivers of glowing stone sprang into the air as his feet kicked off the ground. Bell was determined to go through the wall.

Riding this simple train of thought, Bell collided into Phryne.

A direct attack was the last thing the huge Amazon thought would happen. Her fist changed course at the last instant to adjust to Bell's trajectory.

However, Bell managed to get beneath the overly showy punch and didn't slow down even as his shoulder collided with her exposed flank. *WHAM!* Twisting ever so slightly, his momentum bounced him into the air with minimal damage and knocked Phryne off her feet.

"GUH!"

An airborne Bell, a reeling Phryne.

He had safely cleared the deadly attack.

Phryne's grunt of surprise behind him, Bell landed directly at the base of the altar.

The Amazon looked up from her seat on the floor and yelled at the top of her lungs:

"Sharay! DO HARUHIME, NOWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW!!"

Phryne's scream hit the Amazon like a wrecking ball. But she did as told and lifted the longsword high into the air.

Blade forward, she aimed the tip directly at Haruhime's chest like a javelin. The moon was in perfect position, the now crimson altar pulsing like a beating heart.

Haruhime sat motionless, her gaze following the shining Killing Stone until dropping to the base of the altar the moment the boy touched down.

Bell fought through an awkward landing. One foot, second foot—and he jumped.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Bell launched himself skyward like an arrow fired from an overstressed bow.

A set of blank green eyes. The ceremonial longsword held high. The resonating Killing Stone.

Gaze locked on the stone, Bell withdrew the Hestia Knife from its sheath.

The Amazon's back threatening to overtake him, Bell made his move.

A dark violet streak arced through the air the moment Bell tackled the Amazonian guard from behind.

“YAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

The tip of the jet-black blade pierced the Killing Stone—and shattered it.

Pieces of the stone fell to the floor as the yells of the blade’s owner filled the night.

Haruhime saw it all unfold in slow motion. The Amazon tumbling through the air, the blade landing at her knees, the white-haired boy flying over her head and directly into a stone pillar, breaking it before sliding to a stop at the edge of the Floating Garden.

And finally, the last of the shards falling to the ground.

The ominous red light filling the garden flickered before fading out.

* * *

“Ugh—gahhh…!”

Bell’s exposed skin scraped over the stone surface as he slid all the way to the edge of the Floating Garden. Knees, elbows, and the palms of his hands raw and bleeding, he climbed back to his feet.

The red light that had consumed the garden before was now barely a soft glow. The altar now had a withering, dull red appearance due to Bell accidentally knocking down one of the pillars that focused the moon’s light. The sparkles that had poured upward like a confused waterfall only moments ago were nowhere to be seen.

Catching his breath, Bell returned the knife to its sheath. The sound of many bare feet racing across stone swarmed around him within moments.

The infuriated faces of over fifty Amazons were waiting to meet his eyes when Bell finally looked up. He was completely surrounded.

More accurately, they cut off his escape routes with a half encirclement, trapping him against the outer wall.

“Now you’ve done iiit…!”

A massive Amazon stepped in front of the ring with such force that the ground shook beneath her feet.

At the end of her meaty arm was Haruhime, forcefully pulled from the chains.

Phryne had a fistful of the renart's golden hair clutched in her mighty fist, roughly pulling her forward. Bell's body jerked into action, preparing to rush to her aid. However, the infuriated aura of the rest of the Amazons following their commander's lead made him think twice.

"Brat, just wait till I get my hands on you…!"

"Ah…!"

Phryne slammed Haruhime to the floor by her hair, eyes bloodshot with rage.

"Miss Haruhime!" Bell yelled as the girl stayed down. A low, booming voice cut him off.

"So how you gonna pay, breakin' our Killing Stone like that?"

The sheer power in her voice made Bell lean backward, goose bumps jumping up on his skin.

The Killing Stone lay in pieces. The very sight of the darkening crimson shards served only to make the Amazons even angrier.

Bell had completely ruined the ritual that they'd spent years preparing.

Flames and smoke still rose from the spot where Mikoto's Ignis Fatuus had ignited, and pieces of the pillar Bell tackled slowly rolled across the floor. At least fifty Berbera lay motionless on the ground, looking like little more than corpses dotting the scene of a massacre. They would not be rejoining this fight.

Bell scanned the crowd of Amazons surrounding him and made eye contact with Aisha. He couldn't read her expression in the slightest. Looking away from her gaze, Bell turned to face Phryne.

"All you did was bring us back to square ooone…!"

"…"

The muscles in Bell's face tightened as he stood beneath Phryne's icy glare.

It was true. All his efforts had accomplished was to reset the situation.

That's why he wasn't celebrating. *Ishtar Familia* could acquire a new Killing Stone.

Just like with Aisha, Bell's destroying the stone only delayed the inevitable.

This wasn't over.

…In order to protect Haruhime…

In order to save the girl collapsed at Phryne's feet…

There was no other option than to secure her freedom from the goddess who had set all this in motion.

"…Please release Miss Haruhime."

Overcoming his fear, Bell made his appeal to the Amazons surrounding him.

Lips twitched, fists clenched; the Berbera were not in the mood to listen. Haruhime's green eyes shook as she looked at the boy from beneath an imposing shadow.

Aisha's mouth narrowed into a frown, but the only audible response was Phryne's croaking laughter.

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! Ain't you a joker, Little Rookie!"

The Amazon's massive eyes suddenly unleashed a piercing death stare at the white-haired human.

"Get off your high horse, puny braaat! Who do you think you are?"

"Ahhgh…!"

She grabbed Haruhime's hair again and pulled her up to her feet. Then the frog-like Amazon leaned down to the point that her face was next to her captive's. Phryne's jaw hid Haruhime's shoulder as she opened her mouth to speak.

"This here is our tool! One that we'll use to smash Freya's lot to bits! This has nothin' to do with the likes of you!!"

The Amazons were too hungry for war with the Labyrinth City's most powerful familia to let go of Haruhime's power so easily.

Bell couldn't stand the look of pain on Haruhime's face and tried to repeat his demands, but Phryne wasn't finished.

"Just who do you think kept this varmint alive—a varmint so useless she couldn't even make money as a prostituuuute…? It's her duty to use that body to pay us baaack!"

"…"

"Isn't that righttt, Haruhimeee? You tell him how it isss."

Haruhime's body shook. The Amazon's wide lips whispered into her ear with all the affection a chef would have for a rat.

Momentarily released from Phryne's grasp, Haruhime made eye contact with Bell.

"Master Cranell…"

The young girl's hands came together in front of her chest, still well within grabbing distance of the fleshy boulder behind her. A range of emotions passed through Haruhime's eyes.

"Please take your leave…I'm fine…"

"…"

"Leave me be……I beg you, do not bother yourself with my situation any longer."

Haruhime's voice trembled out of fear of Ishtar and the Amazons around her. Bell watched the renart look away as menacing grins appeared on the lips of every Amazon in his line of sight.

Bell kept his eyes trained on the girl and opened his mouth to speak.

"Stories of heroes."

"Eh…?"

"I made my decision based on the heroes we talked about."

Haruhime's head shot up in surprise. Bell's voice never wavered as he continued.

"I decided to save you."

"How do you mean…?"

"To save you and to prove you wrong…I've made up my mind."

—No hero would ever come for someone as lowly as myself.

—Prostitutes are the ruin of heroes.

Bell declared that he'd come all this way to refute the words she had uttered that night in the red-light district.

Haruhime recoiled, but Bell's confidence only grew.

"The heroes you and I admire—they aren't like that!"

The strength in Bell's voice caught everyone's attention. Aisha and Phryne blinked, the Berbera shifted on their feet, and Haruhime stood in stunned silence.

"A prostitute, a cause of ruin—none of that would matter to a hero!"

"Th-that can't be true…"

"Heroes would fight, no matter how many frightening, powerful enemies are in the way!"

"It can't be like that…"

"My idols, the heroes I look up to, they would protect you to the very end!"

"!"

He had said his piece.

Bell fought off his fear, anxiety, and unease to say exactly what he wanted to since that night, in a voice loud enough for all to hear.

Just like the heroes the two of them aspired to, he would reach out and take her hand.

In fact, he was reaching out to her at this very moment. His outstretched hand reflected in her green eyes, Haruhime's body quivered.

"Ge-ge-ge-ge-ge-geh! The brat thinks he's a heeeero!"

Bell ignored Phryne's chuckling as his eyes burned with the determination he felt in his heart.

The boy's powerful gaze scared Haruhime. She held her own body tight and shook her head back and forth.

"I…I am a prostitute!"

She thrust the words out of her mouth, declaring the title that had become her fate.

"I don't want to become your burden! I am a soiled being, not worthy of anything!"

Bell's chin shot up and he glared down at the renart.

"Don't think that we can't do anything, that you're not worth it!"

"—!"

It was the first time Haruhime had ever heard anger in Bell's voice. He wasn't finished.

"Being laughed at, pointed at, being called names, being called dirty—that's not shameful at all!"

His grandfather's words.

They had become rooted within his heart. Now he brought them crashing down on Haruhime.

"The truly shameful thing is standing still because you can't make up your mind!"

The renart's eyes went wide.

"I still haven't heard what you want!"

Bell's words—and his right hand—reached out even further. He yelled:

"I want to know the real you!"

The boy's voice cut through the remaining smoke and flames still inside the Floating Garden.

It rang out into the night under the full moon. Even as it disappeared into the distance, everyone standing above the weak red cloud felt a change in the wind.

The Amazons stood in silence. Haruhime met Bell's gaze.

Drop. One solitary tear rolled down her cheek and dropped off her chin.

"…Haruhimeeee."

A new sound.

A warning from Phryne from directly behind her ear.

Haruhime's shoulders jumped. Looking at the boy for another moment, she let her gaze fall to the floor.

Her body, hair, and tail shook softly.

Her lips slowly opened.

"*—Grow.*"

And she started *casting.*

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! That'll wooork!"

Phryne laughed with joyous mockery. Despite the boy's call, the renart began to chant instead of answering him.

"Miss Haruhime…!"

Bell grimaced as she clenched her eyes closed tight and continued the incantation.

"*That power and that vessel. Breadth of wealth and breadth of wishes. Until the bell tolls, bring forth glory and illusion.*"

She reached forward from her chest, as if surrendering something to an unseen recipient. The renart's regal voice continued to grow louder.

"Callin' yourself a hero gets you nowhere. Ge-ge-ge-ge-geh! Now I'm gonna show you why!"

Haruhime's beautiful song reverberated throughout the garden as two Berbera handed Phryne a grand battle-ax.

The other Amazons took that as their cue. Weapons were being drawn left and right all around Bell.

"*—Grow.*"

The intimidating clashing of metal and the stomping of feet on stone joined the ensemble of sounds swirling within the garden. The Berbera flexed their muscles and flashed their blades in the moonlight.

Out of all of them, Aisha was the only one who kept her eyes on Haruhime. She was the only one who noticed something strange about the flow of magical energy emanating from the golden-haired fox.

"*Confine divine offerings within this body. This golden light bestowed from above. Into the hammer and into the ground, may it bestow good fortune upon you.*"

The energy of her spell went past all the members of her familia and into the chest of the human boy.

Her incantation nearly complete, a misty cloud of magical energy started to swirl around him.

"Anybody, stop Haruhime!"

Right after Aisha's suddenly frightened scream reached the ears of her allies…

A magic circle appeared above Bell's head as sparkles of white light fell around him like a veil.

The boy glanced around in surprise. It wasn't until he looked above his head that he saw it: a pillar of light—no, a handleless hammer of light forming directly over his head.

He felt the warmth of its light on his skin. His eyes fell onto the renart. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she was smiling.

"*—Grow.*"

The Berbera finally realized what was happening and jumped at the two of them, but they couldn't make it in time.

Because the name of her spell escaped Haruhime's lips at that exact moment.

"*Uchide no Kozuchi.*"

The sparkling hammerhead fell, surrounding Bell's body in a radiant light.

The light flooded his body and spirit with pure power, like a shot of revitalizing adrenaline.

A spark had been lit within him, each flake of light emerging through his skin.

"HAH—HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

The Berbera threw caution to the wind and charged in blades-first.

One particular Berbera brandishing a broadsword came straight at Bell from the front. Her weapon flashed before Bell's eyes, when suddenly *he grabbed hold of its hilt.*

"Huh?!"

He stepped outside the weapon's path and into his opponent's space.

Tripping her with his foot and knocking her over with his free hand, Bell forced the weapon into a wide sweep. All of the closest Berbera were knocked backward.

"GAH!"

Five Berbera hit the floor as Bell put his other hand on the broadsword that had belonged to their ally. It was his now.

It was also at that time that Bell realized the flakes of light emerging from his body were the same ones that had come from Aisha during their fight in the Dungeon. That was the final piece of the puzzle.

Haruhime's Magic, "*Uchide no Kozuchi.*"

It had the power to grant its target a temporary level-up.

While active, the magic allowed the recipient to move with power and speed one level above their Status. That was the reason Ishtar kept her existence under wraps, why she was the trump card against *Freya Familia*—"Level Boost."

The thing that made the Goddess of Beauty swell with glee; she'd worked so hard to conceal the most powerful form of sorcery.

The reason that Phryne and the Berbera refused to let her go was that she possessed a rare magic so powerful it should have been illegal. What Eina had told him at the Guild, about Aisha's sudden increase in strength and speed and Ishtar calling Haruhime her ace in the hole—everything made sense now.

Phryne and the Berbera froze in place. There was no stopping the power, Haruhime's power, from flowing into Bell. He felt it, embraced it, and was fully prepared to use it.

"T-TAKE HIM DOWNNNNNNNNNNNNN!"

More Berbera charged in with a battle cry, but Bell was ready to meet them head-on.

"—FAHH!!"

One swing of the broadsword sent several of the Amazonian warriors flying into the air. Each one crying out as their feet left the ground, they spiraled into a hard landing on the stone surface.

Bell's strikes were too fast for their eyes to see. The broadsword had become a wall they could not break and a weapon they could not block. Sparks flew into the air, joining the pinpricks of light around Bell as even more Berbera were thrown from their feet. The Level 2 Amazons didn't stand a chance, knocked out in the blink of an eye. Even the Level 3s who should have been on equal footing with Bell were tossed aside like tissue paper.

Haruhime had bestowed upon him the abilities of a Level 4 adventurer, and he wasn't about to hold any of it back.

"H-HARUHIMEEEEEEEEEE!"

"UwAH!"

Phryne roared as the one-sided slugfest unfolded in front of her eyes.

A flash of gold within the rush of Amazons caught her attention. She reached out with one meaty hand, grabbed the girl by the neck, and hoisted her off the ground.

"You betrayed usss! Break the spell, you worthless prostitute! Break it now!"

As soon as *Uchide no Kozuchi* was triggered, its effects would last until time ran out or the caster chose to end it. Even if Haruhime were knocked unconscious or worse, the spell would not wear off. Phryne resorted to force out of desperation, but even then, the renart didn't give in.

Neck cracking between muscular fingers and feet swinging through the air, Haruhime clenched her eyes shut. Her cheeks shone in the moonlight, wet with more tears.

Fighting to stay conscious, she forced weak words through her quivering lips.

"I do not want to sell my body ever again…!"

She said it; that shy girl actually said it.

"I do not want to hurt anyone ever again…!"

Afraid of others, terrified of the world, the fragile renart gathered up all the emotion, every desire, every grievance she'd kept bottled up.

"I do not want to die…!"

And put it into two words:

"Save me…!"

She asked for his help.

"!!"

He heard. Bell's eyes instantly zeroed in on her.

Dashing through the horde of Amazons, he hurled himself at Phryne with the force of a cannonball at full speed.

"Wha—?!"

"AAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

The massive Amazon barely managed to get her ax in position to block the incoming blade. However, the impact knocked her back toward the center of the garden.

She let go of Haruhime in mid-fall, sending the helpless girl into the air. Bell reached out to catch her, but a quick shadow got to her first.

"Miss Aisha…!"

"…"

Holding an unconscious Haruhime in her arms, the Amazonian warrior's long black hair danced in the wind behind her. Her narrow eyes were focused solely on Bell.

A heartbeat later she was airborne, jumping backward high into the air to allow a fresh wave of Berbera to attack.

"B-blooood…?!"

Bell engaged the Berbera head-on in an attempt to follow Aisha. At the same time, Phryne climbed to her feet and felt something unusual dripping down her face.

The blade of her ax had carved a gash into her own cheek. Bell's attack caused the injury. She slowly traced the wound with her thick, trembling fingers in disbelief.

"My beautiful face…is BLOODYYY…?!"

Her whole body shook before erupting like a volcano.

"OUTTA MY WAYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!"

She charged forward like an enraged bowling ball, knocking Berbera out of the way as she made a beeline for the white-haired boy. Bell froze for a moment as he watched the bodies hit the stone floor in her wake.

Grand battle-ax and broadsword collided in an explosion of sparks a second later.

"…!"

"I had a soft spot for you, but no morrre! YOU DIE NOWWWWWWW!"

Fueled by pure rage, she spun into a swing that sent Bell arcing through the air.

Landing close to the wall at the edge of the Floating Garden, Bell barely had time to get on his feet to block the Amazon's follow-up attack.

"Ai-Aisha, what do we do? Those two are almost outside the garden!"

"That toad…She's completely lost it."

Phryne drove Bell back onto the bridge amid sharp clashes and showers of sparks. At this rate, they would be in the main tower before any other Berbera could catch up. A younger Amazon came to Aisha for orders.

Aisha watched the battle for a moment before looking down at Haruhime's head resting on her chest.

Trails of dried tears crisscrossed the unconscious renart's cheeks. Aisha closed her eyes.

Then she set the girl who had asked for help for the first time in her life gently on the floor and immediately stood back up.

Just as she was about to issue orders to the Berbera still able to fight—something exploded.

"What was that…?"

Searching for its source, Aisha ran to the edge of the garden to look over the Pleasure Quarter.

◆

"Mr. Welf, that explosion just now…!"

Hestia and her familia saw the flash of light burst out from the Floating Garden as they ran through the brothel-filled streets of the Pleasure Quarter.

Lilly knew that sound and had seen that color of flame many times before. She quickened her steps to catch up with Welf and made eye contact as they ran.

"Ignis Fatuus…!"

Welf groaned under his breath. He knew out-of-control magical energy when he saw it.

Something or someone with magical energy was in a dire enough situation to trigger Ignis Fatuus on top of the building behind the palace.

Hestia wasted no time in declaring that Bell and Mikoto were there. The entire group veered right and set a course directly for Belit Babili.

"Stop right there, intruders!"

"Tsk, not again…!"

Yet another group of Amazons arrived to bar their path through Orario's third district.

Ouka spat in frustration at barely making any headway. Even so, he charged into battle with ax held high.

"Luckily, the opponents aren't strong enough to keep us back!"

"Yes, their forces are spread too thin…!"

Lilly shot her bow gun to distract the closest Amazon while calling out in an attempt to raise morale. Chigusa added her own voice from the middle of the formation as she jumped into the fray, spear a blur.

Ishtar Familia's forces had been split between protecting the Killing Stone Ritual and capturing Bell. Street patrols, the lowest priority, had been assigned to the weakest of the Berbera. It wasn't long before Welf and Ouka carved a path through the lower Level 2 Amazons and the Level 1 animal people and humans sent to support them. Slowly but surely, the patrol guards fell by the wayside.

Thanks to Welf's unusual anti-magic Magic and *Takemikazuchi Familia*'s incredible teamwork, the group worked their way through waves of enemies.

"Can we make it through?"

Takemikazuchi called out to Hestia from behind the protection of his followers. The goddess, however, was silent and in deep contemplation.

Why—why did it come to this…?

The War Game against Apollo had just ended. So why was Bell being targeted by so many gods?

Of course his quick growth would perk their interest…but was this really a coincidence?

Welf and the others rushed to meet the next wave of enemies as Hestia ran through the sequence of events in her head once again. "Outta my way!" the red-haired young man yelled at the Amazons who blocked his path—*KA-BOOM*.

"Huh…?"

Hestia, Lilly, Welf, and all of *Takemikazuchi Familia* looked over their shoulders to find the source of the latest explosion.

They immediately spotted a column of smoke emerging from a completely different direction. Flames licked the sky as the pyre rose even higher.

It was the same explosion that caught Aisha's attention in the Floating Garden. An eerie silence continued for a few seconds before…*BOOM, KA-BOOM, BOOM, BOOM!*

More explosions came from around the Pleasure Quarter—no, the entire third district.

That's when the first screams reached their ears.

"What is going on?!"

Ishtar herself had joined the hunt for Bell in the main palace when the explosions started going off outside. She was quick to demand a report.

Without her most trusted servant at her side, she addressed the first member of her familia she could find. The unlucky passerby dropped to his knees and hastily strung words together.

"S-some intruders are attacking the Pleasure Quarter…!"

"Attacking…?"

Pausing for a moment in shock, Ishtar then ran out of the hall and onto the closest balcony where she could see all of the Pleasure Quarter. Waves of hot air washed over her bronze skin the moment she stepped outside.

The condition of her territory made her jaw drop.

Loud noises, flashes of light, screams, and explosions erupted from every corner of the Night District under the moonlight.

Countless human figures advanced through the streets, her streets, under the cover of smoke and darkness. Shadows of the invading adventurer army flashed in every direction as new explosions went off all around them. Ishtar was lost for words.

Her familia was under siege.

The invading adventurers were moving swiftly among the brothels. Members of her familia fell one by one with each swing of a blade, each Magic casting, each flash of a magical sword. Ishtar could see it all.

What is this, what is going on?! Her mind raced as she tightened her white-knuckled grip on the balcony railing.

Her voice trembled as she watched the flames of war dance their way through the Pleasure Quarter.

"Wh-what? Nobody would have the gall to…!"

She was the grand and mighty Ishtar, head of Orario's feared *Ishtar Familia*.

Who would show up with this many warriors, unannounced, weapons drawn, and start a fight with someone as powerful as she? That was as far as her train of thought needed to go.

The color drained from her face.

"It…it can't be…?"

"E-ENEMY ATTACK

It could be found on discarded armor and weapons scattered throughout the streets. Another flash of steel brought another Berbera to her knees, buckler rolling to the middle of the street and coming to a stop with her familia's emblem facing the sky.

They had been overrun. Elves, dwarves, animal people, prums, Amazons, all types of demi-human and human warriors surged into the Pleasure Quarter. They took over strategic positions, kicked over barrels in the streets, advanced over rooftops and eliminated Berbera resistance with ruthless efficiency. The invading men and women didn't try to hide their faces—quite the opposite. They wore the beautiful and handsome features that had captured the attention of their goddess like badges of honor. They wielded the power that kept them in her good graces without any hesitation. An elf with a fluid spear, an animal person with pulsing magical energy in the palms of his hands, a dwarf with a war hammer that overshadowed him in size—every single one of them showed no mercy to the opposition.

Swarms of noncombatants and prostitutes ran for their lives in the face of this one-sided assault. Male customers, literally caught with their pants down, cowered in fear as the invaders pointed their weapons toward only those who attempted to bar their advance.

"E-Eina? EINA! Big problem—really, really BIG PROBLEM!"

—The onslaught was being monitored from the Guild Headquarters northwest of the Pleasure Quarter.

Caught off guard by the panic in her coworker's voice from outside, Eina jumped up from her desk and went to join her. She wasn't prepared for what was waiting for her.

Joining the masses of Guild employees who had gathered on the front garden, Eina saw that every set of eyes was glued to the flashes of magical light, billowing smoke, and orange-red glow emerging from the southeast.

"That direction—the Pleasure Quarter…? Could it be—Belit Babili is burning?!"

Eina found her coworker Misha pacing back and forth among the nervously chattering staff of the Guild. Coming to a stop next to her, Eina cast her unsteady emerald-green gaze toward the pandemonium on the other side of Orario.

"An outbreak? What familia would be powerful enough to launch an offensive against Lady Ishtar?"

Eina thought out loud, unable to shake her disbelief.

Then it hit her like a jolt of lightning.

"It can't be…"

"It can't be…"

Other deities living in Orario watched the flames rise from the southeast.

"There's no way…"

Some watched from their homes; others climbed to the tops of tall buildings for a better look.

"She wouldn't…"

From the Shopping District, from the engineering wards, from trading outposts, deities young and old watched from a distance.

"Could that be…Ganesha?"

The divine beings all had the same reaction as Eina. A certain vermilion-haired goddess watched from the tallest tower of her home, Twilight Manor. Her thin eyes opened wider than usual; Loki kept a sharp vigil on the events taking place on the opposite side of the city.

Windows beneath her swung open as the heads of her followers appeared one by one. They yelled to one another, trying to figure out what was happening. Loki whispered to herself:

"Couldn't be…Freya?"

Loki's tongue snapped at the thought, vermilion eyes opening wider.

"That airhead, makin' a move…"

Ker-tap. Ker-tap.

The sound of high heels on stone echoed through the scream-filled streets.

The bodies of fallen Amazons littered the streets, their faces illuminated by the flames reaching to grasp the sky. And yet her beauty managed to remain intact, a diamond traveling through the rough.

With her warriors clearing a path before her, she advanced through the Pleasure Quarter at her own fast pace.

"The Pleasure Quarter is under our control."

"Ottar's team has reached the palace."

A man and woman appeared at her side to bring her up to speed. Freya kept walking, only saying, "I see," without looking at the messengers.

The invaders showed no remorse for their actions. They traveled north through the third district with either an air of arrogance or resignation to the knowledge that their goddess's will was absolute.

"Both of you, go to the front. That boy, he should be there."

The goddess's unblinking silver eyes remained focused on her target: the gleaming golden palace in the distance.

The first explosion hadn't alerted only Hestia and Takemikazuchi to Bell's position, it showed Freya exactly where to go.

"But My Lady, your escort…"

"Not needed."

Freya didn't listen to her follower's concern.

"Eliminate all who stand in your way."

And find the boy. Those were her orders.

The two gave a quick bow and left her side. Freya kept walking, speeding up.

Her straight silver hair swayed in the breeze. The sounds of battle around her never ceased. Surrounded by clashes, screams, and roaring flames, Freya continued to walk down the middle of the street, all the way to what was left of Belit Babili's front gate.

Passing by a crater with random poles of warped steel littering the ground, Freya could feel the traces of magical energy on her skin as she passed through the front garden and stepped up to the palace. Then she just happened to look up.

Her silver eyes caught a glimpse of a bronze-skinned deity looking down at her with amethyst eyes from a balcony.

Freya returned the scowl with a glare menacing enough to intimidate a hawk, an ice-cold grin on her lips.

The other Goddess of Beauty's face took on a ghostly shade of blue.

—Mere minutes had passed since *Freya Familia* began the invasion.

"…"

The mountainous frame of the boaz with the title of warlord stood with a human girl lying limp in his arms.

The hair band that kept her black ponytail in place long gone, her singed hair listlessly drifted in the breeze. She had fallen from the top of the building behind the palace. The large man saw her in time and caught her before she hit the ground.

"…Self-sacrifice to protect your allies, was it?"

Ignis Fatuus—the unique markings of internal burns gave Ottar a clue to the young girl's fate.

She lay motionless in his gentle embrace, eyes closed.

The girl's actions had earned her the boaz warlord's respect. He lay her down on the ground and brought out an elixir from his item pouch before carefully pouring it on her skin.

The girl's body, which was on the verge of falling apart due to the sheer number and severity of her injuries, started to heal on the spot. Life once again took root within her.

"Hey, Ottar. Quit playin' around."

"Don't waste time on that girl," a catman—Allen—snapped from behind him. Glaring coldly at his ally as he walked past, the top-class adventurer flipped a spear over his wrist.

Four more 120-celch-tall figures emerged from the shadows behind him: four prums. Two more sets of eyes were lurking in the darkness, those of an elf and a dark elf.

"We're going to say this only once, Ottar."

"The boy who has taken over her favor—Bell Cranell. We don't like him."

"We will follow the goddess's will and eliminate all threats."

"But we refuse to help him."

"…Do as you will."

The four prums showed no fear in speaking frankly with their familia's commander. The other three said nothing, their silence indicating they shared the same opinion.

Ottar's expression remained stoic despite his borderline insubordinate allies. However, he did draw a line.

"Goddess Ishtar does not escape. Block the exits."

"And the ones who get in our way?"

"—Obliterate them."

Ottar's tone remained cool and collected as he led the team of seven adventurers toward the golden palace.

The strongest battle party in Orario, composed completely of top-tier adventurers, entered Belit Babili.

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Roaring flames illuminated the streets of the Pleasure Quarter in place of the broken magic-stone lamps.

The flames worked in unison with other adventurers to isolate the third district, keeping everything inside. It was indeed the final hours of a once-proud fortress. Even more explosions were still ringing out in the distance, signaling the battle was not over yet.

Of all the spacious districts in Orario, the one that had given in to desire and adultery was now burning red under the full moon.

“To think it would come to this…”

A dandy deity stood on the southeastern portion of the city wall that wrapped all the way around Orario. He stood right up against the guard wall, looking down over the carnage.

Feathered hat planted firmly on his head, Hermes watched the flames rise with Asfi standing a few paces behind him.

“The one who told Ishtar about Bell in the first place was none other…than me…”

The words fell out of Hermes’s mouth, his eyes tracing the ring of flames around the once thriving district.

His orange hair wavered in the blasting heat, the precisely laid inferno reflected in his orange eyes. His breaths were short, as if he was struggling to hold back tears.

“I’m the reason all this happened…Ahh, what is this piercing guilt in my chest…?”

He opened his arms wide and shook them, as if trying to cleanse himself. The deity looked down and quietly brought his hands together in front of his chest.

Directly behind the deity, his follower looked at his back with a cold stare through her glasses.

She sighed to herself at the same moment the light from a large explosion washed over them.

“So, how much of this was *according to plan*?”

Hermes lifted his head and looked over his shoulder. An unmistakable grin grew in the corners of his lips.

The remorseful aura was gone. Dropping the dramatic act, Hermes turned around to face Asfi and give his answer.

“First off, I wasn’t trying to make something on this scale happen. I just thought that something interesting might be set in motion if I provided a spark…That's all."

Asfi's eyes twitched, a sure tell that she was keeping her opinion to herself.

Hermes had sown the seeds.

All he did was tell Ishtar about Bell under interrogation.

All he did was alert Freya out of concern for Bell's safety.

That was it. They were very small seeds in the bigger picture.

Hermes once again turned around to watch the battles unfold amid the flames and moonlight.

"I'm not saying they're dancing in the palm of my hand. This completely outdid my expectations. Ishtar's jealousy was far more intense than I expected, just as Lady Freya was more attached to him than I thought."

He had no idea something this big would happen so soon.

His grin grew wider with each word.

"Well, even the best laid plans, you know? Nothing scarier than a jealous goddess, right, Asfi?"

"…"

His voice was laced with excitement. Asfi continued to stare at the back of her god's head but didn't say anything.

"But most importantly…Bell's good nature outdid my wildest dreams."

Hermes cast his gaze at the palace in the middle of Orario's third district and narrowed his eyes.

The only information he'd given Bell was the existence of the Killing Stone.

Bell figured out the rest on his own without being provided with any hints.

Most likely, Freya wouldn't have made a move if Bell escaped from Ishtar's grasp. The course of today's events changed two or three times based on Bell's actions alone—and the boy had no idea.

He just went to save one renart he couldn't leave behind.

But not recklessly. Bell was ready to lose everything.

Asfi listened to her god. She let his words sink in for a moment before asking a question of her own.

"Was your intention to destroy *Ishtar Familia* or entertainment? Or was it perhaps…a *trial*?"

Hermes heard her question.

But he chose to smile at her instead of answering.

"People, gods…Everyone is seeking a girl like that. Every single being."

At the base of the city wall…

Hundreds of humans and demi-humans ran past in a desperate effort to escape the Pleasure Quarter.

The many gods watched the Pleasure Quarter from afar.

And a renart girl still lay unconscious in the Floating Garden.

Hermes raised his arms as he took it all in—the battle still raging on the roof of the palace between a large woman and a white-haired boy. Then Hermes made his point.

"The world wants a hero."

The last of the Three Grand Quests: the Black Dragon.

A darkness hanging over the city.

And the root of it all, the Dungeon.

It was hidden by a veil of peace, but in reality there was a ticking time bomb to complete destruction lurking in their midst.

Hermes declared that what the world needed, was yearning for, was the birth of the true hero.

"As for the one who can save the world from this tragic fate…I choose Bell."

"Not someone from *Loki Familia*? Not even *Freya Familia*?"

"That's right."

Shrouded in darkness of night, Hermes finally gave Asfi a straight answer, despite not turning around to look at her.

The deity continued staring into the flames, talking to no one in particular, like a monologue.

"Zeus, I, Hermes—no, Orario as a whole—shall finish what you could not."

A dandy smile emerging on his lips, Hermes looked to the heavens.

"We shall mold him into the last hero."

Then—

Hermes tipped his hat to the sky before returning his gaze to the burning district. His eyes narrowed.

"And for that to happen…Ishtar and all the children who follow you, please become his first stepping-stones. What? It's not like you're not going to die."

If it was for the hero…

Hermes had no qualms about using the jealousy of a goddess to his advantage.

Hermes watched the flames engulf even more of the battlefield around the boy, a cruel smile on his face.

“Uh-oh…looks like *she* knows. Better get out of here before she really gets pissed.”

Far away at the base of the palace, two silver orbs were aimed in his direction.

Hermes was quick to cover his face with his feathered hat, and he broke off eye contact as soon as the Goddess of Beauty noticed his presence.

“Scary, scary,” he muttered to himself with a grin, and left his spot on the city wall behind.

“…Zeus, I’m betting everything on that white light.”

That brilliant shine that took down a floor boss. The boy’s blindingly pure soul.

To Hermes, it was but a sign of things to come—the boy’s familia myth.

With those words, Hermes turned his back on the battlefield.

The flames of war climbed high into the sky, tinting the heavens bright red.

CHAPTER 7 GODDESS WAR

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CHAPTER 7

GODDESS WAR

Screams of agony filled the Night District.

What had once been bustling streets fully equipped to meet the exotic desires of its many clients was an assemblage of smoldering framework. The lucky buildings had massive holes and long gashes in their outside walls; the rest were nothing but piles of rubble at this point. Even the red-light district had been torn to shreds. The air was thick with the eerie residue of spent magical energy. The surviving ajura trees bent and swayed in the waves of heat coming from the nearby flames. Gusts of wind carried the sparks in and among their blue petals. Devoid of human activity, the prostitutes who hadn't escaped in time were being held by the invaders at blade point in an open courtyard.

Other areas of the Pleasure Quarter were still in chaos; the shrieks of terrified prostitutes and the clash of swords never ceased. The flames of war spread throughout Orario's third district, getting ever closer to the palace at its center, Belit Babili.

"Wh-what happened here…?"

Hestia whispered to herself. Their group had finally forced their way into the main hall on the first floor of the palace. The young goddess forgot to breathe as she saw with her own eyes the extent of the damage.

Chunks of the white stone floor and walls were missing, decorative pillars collapsed and laying on the floor like fallen trees. The bodies of badly injured Amazonian warriors were mixed into the debris. Judging by their position, Hestia thought the Amazons hadn't stood a chance against their attackers. Battle was still raging outside the building. Chigusa and the rest of *Takemikazuchi Familia* were too stunned to speak. Lilly gulped down the air in her throat before saying as calmly as possible:

"Most likely a raid. But what familia would attack…?"

Hestia listened intently to her follower thinking out loud. Takemikazuchi looked down at the goddess with a grim expression. She met his gaze and both reluctantly nodded.

They'd seen the attackers on the way in—more specifically, they'd seen the crest engraved on their weapons and armor. Hestia knew there was no denying it.

"Freya, she made a move…!"

The sound of a blade piercing armor, closely followed by blood splashing on the floor, echoed through the higher floors of the palace.

"H-help…m…!"

Gravity pulled her body off a black blade. Separated from her team, a single Berbera fell to the floor. The dark elf didn't listen to her pleas, silently watching as a pool of blood spread out at his feet.

"Hegni, no killing," came the sharp voice of an elf just down the hallway. The bodies of more Berbera lay on the floor behind him, twitching in pain or completely motionless. One of them struggled to stand, her injured body refusing to cooperate. The elf spun around, thrust out his hand, muttered an extremely short trigger spell, and mercilessly sent a powerful bolt of lightning into her chest. The spell hit with so much force that her convulsing body went through the wall, leaving behind a gaping hole. Jagged burn marks appeared on the floor and walls as soon as the dust cleared.

"The F-Four Knights of the Golden Flame…Bringar…?!"

On a different floor, four javelins pierced each limb of a terrified Amazonian warrior.

The heels of four boots collided with her torso a moment later, knocking loose the javelins and sending the Level 3 adventurer crashing to the floor. Four prums, each equipped with body armor and helmets, split up to engage their remaining targets. The rest of the Amazons were launched through walls, slammed into the floor, or bounced off the ceiling in a matter of seconds. None of them could stand her ground.

The four advanced to a stairwell at the end of the hall that led to an outside passageway. One of them, carrying over his shoulder a war hammer that stood taller than he did, grinned. *SLAM! CRASH!!* The stairwell was nothing more than a heap of wood and stone in the back of the hallway when the dust cleared.

"Every set of stairs in the back of the palace up to the twentieth floor has been demolished."

"Any fighters still on their feet are next. Take away Goddess Ishtar's options."

The four prums convened to confirm their strategy before splitting up. They disappeared into separate hallways, streaks in darkness.

Ishtar's remaining forces inside the lower half of the palace couldn't hold their position, their screams of pain spiraling through the halls of Belit Babili like strokes of the clock.

"—Hey, big guy! We goin' the right way?"

"Hell if I know! Every staircase is in pieces!"

On a different floor, Welf and Ouka raced through room after room with their weapons drawn.

Just like in the Pleasure Quarter, the two gawked at the level of destruction as they cleared the way through the palace with the others in tow. Grateful that the mysterious invaders hadn't paid any attention to them, they cut through the chaos and panic that had taken over Belit Babili.

"?!"

"A Berbera!"

One of the warrior prostitutes appeared in front of Welf and Ouka. They'd managed to avoid encountering enemies since entering the main building, but their streak of luck had come to an end.

However, the Amazon had already seen a great deal of battle. Blood leaking from fresh cuts all over her body, she held a long club in her left hand while her right clutched the side of her chest. Breathing staggered and ragged, she stood just in front of the entrance to the next room.

"Wa—AWWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

Her bloodshot eyes flashed open as she charged forward, a nightmarish mix of power and desperation.

She swung the club over her shoulder like a tiger bringing its claws to bear. Ouka managed to absorb the blow using his ax as a shield. However, he couldn't keep his feet and staggered backward.

"Big guy!"

"This one's Level Three!"

The pain shooting through Ouka's hands nearly made him drop the ax. Welf jumped forward to protect him but was knocked to the floor by the Amazon's next swing.

Welf had exhausted his supply of materials making magic swords for the War Game. There hadn't been a chance to restock and make more after the move. "Dammit!" he cursed, wishing that he had some way to overcome the difference in level staring him in the face. The Amazon's mere presence was overwhelming—but suddenly, a nearby wall exploded outward.

"!"

Ouka, Welf, and their opponent each watched in surprise as the splinters of wood and chunks of stone flew into the middle of the room.

One Amazon slid to Welf's feet among the debris.

"You aren't worth my time, whore."

A catman appeared behind the hole in the wall, glaring at the woman's body on the floor.

Fresh blood dripped from the tip of the long spear in his right hand, short fangs bared in a sneer. The short-stature adventurer quickly noticed the conscious Amazon frozen in the middle of the room.

"HYE—HYYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

She threw her club to the side and made a break for the exit. But the catman was faster.

He became an elusive blur to Welf's and Ouka's eyes. One moment he was outside the hole in the wall; the next, the dull end of his spear was sending the Amazon through a different wall. It was exactly what had happened moments before, just this time they got to see how it happened. The humans blinked a few times in disbelief.

The catman's eyes shifted in their direction.

"So, what are you?"

His aura was so intimidating that neither of them could open their mouths to speak. He focused on Welf, and judging by his equipment and the air about the young human, correctly guessed that he was a smith. The catman was not pleased.

"Smiths belong in a forge…Go swing your hammer, peon."

"Wha…Say that again, you piece of shit!"

Welf's pride as a smith drove him into a rage. The catman ignored him, didn't even look his way as he left the room.

Only the first of his soft steps could be heard as the catman disappeared through the newest hole in the wall. Welf was seething with rage, but Ouka was awestruck.

“Level Six, ‘Vana Freya’…Allen Fromel.”

The name of the top-class adventurer belonging to *Freya Familia* spilled out of Ouka’s mouth.

A feeling of helplessness overtook Welf as he staggered forward and punched the wall with a strong *thud*.

◆

“N-no…Inconceivable.”

Ishtar let go of the balcony railing, refusing to believe what she had just seen. Recovering from the shock, she raced back inside.

The sight of their aggravated goddess sent a wave of fear through the guards still in her chamber.

“Where is Phryne? Is the ritual finished yet?”

“Th-there has been no word! None of the messengers have come…!”

The first guard in her line of sight gave a knee-jerk response. This served only to irritate Ishtar even further as she desperately searched for answers.

Just why was it that Freya chose now to attack?

Even if Hermes had alerted her to the presence of the Killing Stone, there was no way the messenger could’ve known about Haruhime’s sorcery—the Level Boost should still be a secret. Freya attacking preemptively made no sense.

“…Bell Cranell, is it?”

Was the silver-haired Goddess of Beauty really that attached to the boy?

Attached to the point that kidnapping him was something for which she’d go to any lengths, including war, to punish her?

“That vixen is doing this for…one child?!”

—That’s insane!! Absolute nonsense!!

Ishtar’s fists shook as her heart screamed out in disbelief. She’d been playing a prank, trying to be a thorn in Freya’s side, and yet that joke had struck the wrong nerve. However, it was far too late now.

What to do, what to do? The wheels in her mind turned, going faster and faster. Should she hide the Killing Stone and Haruhime, and then meet up with Phryne and the others for protection? Or should she escape from her ruined home—no, from Orario entirely? She didn't know which way to go.

Ishtar was so caught up in her own dilemma that only now did she notice the lack of battle cries downstairs.

"Huh? Wh-what's wrong?"

The Berbera whom she had the most affection for, the ones who should be defending her in this time of need, were silent.

Ishtar made her way to the top of the grand stairwell on the thirty-first floor. Looking down at the very spot of her second encounter with Bell Cranell, she leaned over the railing and called out to them.

Her voice echoed through the uneasy stillness surrounding the ornate pillars that decorated the wide chamber below.

Until…*ker-tap, ker-tap*.

High heels on stone announced the presence of another goddess.

"No…"

Ishtar's amethyst eyes opened as wide as they could go as locks of silver hair and an ominous smile came into the light.

Two unblinking silver eyes were locked onto her. Freya pulled her long silver bangs back behind her ear.

"It's been a while, hasn't it, Ishtar? Since the last Denatus, I believe? Have you been well?"

"F-Freya…?"

"I hate to be rude, but there's something we need to discuss. No—more like a final good-bye."

Ishtar choked on her own words. The smile didn't leave Freya's lips as she made her intentions known.

The goddess was alone, her escort nowhere to be seen. Seeing this, Ishtar roughly turned to her own guards and shouted at the top of her lungs:

"S-seize her! Make that woman kneel before me! Both of you!"

She ordered the last of her personal guards, male and female humans, to attack.

The two had been silently waiting at attention, keeping their eyes down. Both rushed forward, descending the staircase in a heartbeat.

Freya was already in the middle of the chamber, vulnerable from all sides. Ishtar's guards drew their weapons and charged forward—and slowed down.

“?!”

The man was the first. His body quivered the moment he set eyes on the silver-haired goddess, and he fell to his knees.

The deity grinned as the female guard wobbled in place, like a drunk person trying to insist there was nothing wrong. Freya calmly walked up to the young woman and whispered something in her ear. Every joint in the human’s body gave way as she collapsed like a rag doll.

The male guard made every attempt to stand up, but his legs just wouldn’t obey. He grew more desperate with each passing heartbeat. Freya walked up to him and gently ran her fingers down his cheek. The man’s body shivered before he fell face-first onto the floor.

“M-my children…!”

—They had been Charmed. Ishtar couldn’t even finish her own sentence.

The same scene must’ve played out many times. Flashes of light coming in from outside revealed a long trail of motionless bodies behind the silver-haired goddess, each of them Charmed into submission.

Male or female, it didn’t matter. None of Ishtar’s followers could prevent Freya from melting their hearts.

“They’re all very cute, Ishtar.”

“Hyeeeee…!”

Turning her back toward the fallen guards, Freya made her way to the foot of the staircase.

Ishtar could no longer hide the fear threatening to take over. A pitiful squeal escaping her lips, she made a break for the thirty-second floor.

* * *

“Burning…?”

The Amazonian warrior whispered weakly as she gazed down at the battlefield from the edge of the Floating Garden.

Almost no time had passed since she heard the first explosion. Now the smoke was closing in on her like the oncoming tide. They were already surrounded, and their home was now under siege.

Each scream of pain by one of their kin in their territory felt like a blade through the heart for every Berbera still on the roof.

"Wh-what do we do, Aisha…?"

A young Amazon with her long hair wrapped with many bands asked Aisha in a trembling voice on the verge of tears.

"We can't reach Lady Ishtar…No one's made it to her in one piece."

Aisha frowned as another of the Berbera wailed in despair.

All the Amazons waited on the edge of the garden for their leader's next words.

"…*Ishtar Familia*'s as good as dead. Lena, lead the others outta here."

The fact that Freya's army had invaded first all but sealed their defeat.

Her declaration hitting home, the Berbera hung their heads in silence.

"The others…What about you, Aisha?"

Lena's thick ponytail swung around her waist as she rushed up to her beloved leader.

"Me? I'm stayin' here."

Aisha broke off eye contact with the girl and cast her gaze toward the altar.

Haruhime was still lying there, unconscious on the stone floor.

"I got a score to settle."

A heavy metal clang rang down from above. Every Berbera looked up at the roof of the main palace far overhead.

◆

Yet another clash of metal on metal shrieked its way toward the dark-blue sky. The moon lit up the wispy clouds like a lamp behind many intricate shades.

Two figures collided on awnings, roofs, and the outside wall of the palace, destroying bits and pieces along the way.

A grand battle-ax sliced through the air until its momentum was stopped by a rising broadsword. An explosion of sparks erupted every time the weapons smashed into each other.

"Gwah!!"

"NuRAAH!!"

Bell and Phryne's duel had arrived at the highest point of Belit

Babili. There was nothing between their battle and the heavens above.

Ishtar had fitted the tallest point of her fortress with many exotic plants and an extravagant water feature that included a fountain. It was, without a doubt, a space fit for a goddess. Her quarters stood in the middle of a space that rivaled the Coliseum in size. Now it was nothing more than the eye of the storm as the battle raged around it.

Bell absorbed another downward strike of the ax and guided it safely to the side with the broadsword. Bracing his muscles to withstand the impact, he spun forward toward his opponent and brought the blade back up toward her chest.

Phryne easily knocked the weapon out of the way and swung her own. Bell's broadsword made it back in position in time to block her counterattack.

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH! Dance for meeeee!"

The gash on her cheek opened a little wider as a crazed smile grew on her lips. Phryne's eyes never blinked.

Unrelenting rage coursing through her veins, the massive Amazon moved in for another attack with a joyous bloodlust in her eyes.

"Isn't it amaaazing~~~~!! Haruhime's sorcery?"

Thanks to her Magic, *Uchide no Kozuchi*, Bell was able to keep up with Phryne blow for blow. The Amazon was right, Haruhime's Level Boost granted incredible power.

However, it wasn't perfect. While Bell's speed was on par with her, she still had every other advantage.

Even with the assistance of an enchantment that should be illegal, Bell couldn't overcome the wall that separated him from top-class adventurers.

Bell gritted his teeth as he desperately tried to use his elevated Status to hold back the onslaught of attacks coming from one of Orario's most powerful fighters.

"With that kind of power, Level Six doesn't mean nothinggg!! Makes the Kenki a mere giiirl!"

"!"

Only Bell's swift combination of steps allowed him to protect himself against Phryne's attacks. Frustration boiling over, the Amazon launched into a verbal tirade while keeping up the pressure.

Her eyes and lips twitched with each wave of anger building to a crescendo.

"That little rag doll, Orario's most beautiful adventurerrr? Like hell she is!"

"…!"

"The way you fight, it's pissing me off more and more every second! Her shadow's in every dodge!"

Just as Ishtar held a grudge against Freya, Phryne had the same kind of ferocious spite toward Orario's strongest female knight.

The raging fire within her had two sources: the girl's blond hair and golden eyes that could pass for those of a deity and the fact that the puny human had ascended past her to Level 6. It was no surprise that she could see the effects of Aiz's teachings in Bell's movements. Phryne's jealousy fueled her fury to the boiling point.

"With that power, I could stomp the VARMINT INTO DUUUUUST!!"

Grabbing her ax with both hands, Phryne unleashed the swing with every intention of crushing the visions of Aiz—along with Bell.

He jumped to the side at the last second, and stone debris exploded from the spot where the ax came down. Ignoring the new massive hole in the floor, Bell instead looked at his opponent.

The girl he held in the highest esteem, his idol, had just been insulted. A new fire burned bright within Bell as he screamed at the top of his lungs, charging his enemy blade-first.

"UWWAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

"Nuh!"

Bell's surging wave of attacks forced Phryne into a defensive position for the first time.

She raised her ax to protect herself against his stolen weapon moving in from every angle imaginable among the flashing beads of light surrounding the boy. Her large frame shook every time their blades collided.

Bell focused all his strength into one diagonal slash to inflict as much pain as possible. A wide-eyed Phryne spun out of the way in the nick of time but lost her footing as a wave of debris washed over her.

"—No getting cockyyy!"

"!"

She knocked Bell's follow-up attack out of the way. The next moment, her body was a blur.

His weapon above his head, Bell's chest was completely exposed. Phryne buried her foot between his ribs with a powerful front kick.

"GaWAH!"

Despite getting his knee up in time to prevent a fatal blow, Bell was launched through the iron-grated fence that surrounded Ishtar's private garden. The barrier crumbled under the sheer force of impact. With nothing to break his fall, Bell tumbled off the edge, toward the ground far below.

"GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GE-GEH!"

Croaking laughter filled the air. Phryne was ready to jump after him to deliver the final blow.

The sound of someone calling out to her reached her ears just before she could.

"Ph-Phryne! Lady Ishtar's in trouble—save her!"

"…A-AhhNNN?"

The Amazon turned around just as two Berbera emerged onto the roof from a stairwell.

Out of breath, the two panicking Amazons rushed to her side. Exhaling through her nose, Phryne ignored them. Turning her back, she caught a glimpse of the Pleasure Quarter for the first time and froze in place.

"What the hell is going on…?"

Many columns of smoke emerging from the city below reflected in her bulging eyes as she somehow chained her rage.

Phryne finally noticed that something very bad was happening around her home.

"There you are! Where have you been?"

"Watch your words, varmint. Now tell me—what's all that?"

"O-our territory, the Pleasure Quarter, was invaded…!"

Phryne listened in disbelief as the two Amazons brought her up to speed.

They fell silent as all three women felt the presence of another on the roof.

"…?"

It came from the opposite side of the garden. The Berbera stood on the east side of the roof; the newcomer emerged on the west side.

Moonlight blocked by passing clouds, the newcomer was shrouded in darkness.

“—So this is the highest point.”

A low male voice came from a hulking frame.

He had at least a head over the two-meder-tall Phryne. The three Amazons watched the muscular newcomer quietly walk through the heavily damaged garden.

Judging from the outline of the shadow…he was an animal person.

“D-dammit, dammit all…!”

“Ha-HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Phryne watched him with suspicion. The Berbera, however, launched themselves at the newcomer in desperation. Whether it was the Amazonian blood in their veins or the dire situation that drove them, the two warriors charged the mysterious figure at full speed.

The muscular shadow watched the two armed adventurers rush toward him and calmly swung his right fist.

“

Short, rust-colored fur and the ears of a wild boar.

Bones as solid as iron, with a towering body built like a sheer cliff.

He turned his foot toward the Amazon, a look of stoic, fearless determination glued to his face.

"Phryne Jamil…the last one."

Ottar's monotone yet overwhelming voice filled the air.

Phryne's fingers trembled. Part of it was awe, but mostly fear.

"Wh-why are you here?!"

Her voice shrieked as she comprehended the severity of the situation at last.

Freya Familia hadn't waited for *Ishtar Familia* to declare war, and they'd attacked first.

Cold beads of sweat rolled down her fat cheeks. She struggled to clear her throat.

This was inevitable—picking a fight with *Freya Familia* meant that they would eventually have to deal with Ottar. Therefore, they already had a plan in place.

Phryne and the top Berbera, boosted by Killing Stone shards, would have used various types of anti-Status Magic and curses to make him as physically weak as possible. Trying to engage this man in combat without doing so was the same as suicide. They didn't stand a chance against him at full power.

Even if the Level Boost gave her the strength to surpass the Kenki, Aiz Wallenstein, it would do little to protect her against the warlord.

He wore no armor and carried no weapon but still overpowered his opponents by his very presence.

The very top of *Freya Familia*.

Orario's strongest adventurer.

The Labyrinth City's one and only—Level 7.

The Zenith.

Oujya "Warlord" Ottar.

"Guh…gahhh…ge-gih…!"

His *genuine power* was stifling. Phryne gripped the handle of her ax in terror, each digit soaked in sweat.

It was the same feeling as standing in front of a floor boss in the deep levels of the Dungeon.

The horrifying knowledge that the moment she showed her back, it was all over.

The only option on the table for the Level 5 Phryne Jamil was forward.

“GEH-OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Howling with all her might, Phryne took the fight to the enemy.

Raising the grand battle-ax high in her right hand, she decided to use all her momentum to drive the weapon into his shoulder.

“…”

Ottar knew exactly why she had been given the title “Androctonus, the Man Slayer,” as thousands of male adventurers had fallen to her blade. The same blade that was coming at him at this very moment.

But he silently stuck out his left arm.

“?!”

He stopped the attack—by grabbing Phryne’s right hand and the ax handle with his left.

Complete protection. The silver blade of the ax didn’t come anywhere close to his skin. Ottar’s boulder-like hand completely enclosed his opponent’s meaty fist.

As for the collision, a slight bend in his elbow was enough to absorb it without his feet budging in the slightest. Phryne’s attack had come to an abrupt halt.

Rust-colored eyes narrowing in a frown, Ottar clenched the muscles in his left hand.

“GIEE—GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Many snapping sounds shot out from beneath Ottar’s grip. The weapon handle broke, along with most of the bones in her hand.

Her scream pierced the night air. Phryne bent backward in pain the moment the powerful man released her.

The blade of the grand battle-ax hit the floor at her feet with a clacking *thud*. At the same time, Ottar stepped behind the still-reeling Phryne.

“~~~~~~!”

The Amazon was grasping her disfigured appendage as the boar hooked his arm under her shoulder and threw her to the ground. Her round body slid and rolled through the piles of stone built up on the surface of the floor. Dust rose, making a small cloud as she came to a stop on her stomach at the base of the fountain.

Writhing in pain, Phryne caught a glimpse of her reflection in the water.

Her tan skin was covered with hundreds of cuts, most of them bleeding.

Her face, unequaled by anyone in the world, was caked in blood and dust.

“My…My beautiful…MY BEAUTIFUL FACE~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~!”

She howled at the sky, eyes turning deep red. Wet black hair was plastered to her skin. Fury unleashed once again, she launched herself at Ottar.

Her target: his throat. Both hands, intact or not, were wide open and yearning to squeeze the life out of him.

“DIE, BOARMAN! DIEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE EEEEEEEEEE!”

More stone tiles broke beneath her feet as the Amazon rampaged forward. Ottar brushed her left arm to the side.

“Too much noise.”

Then he drove his own fist directly into her path.

“GeHEE!”

Landing squarely in the middle of her face, Ottar’s punch propelled Phryne skyward.

Whistling through the air, the frog-like Amazon’s large frame arced over the side of the garden and toward the ground.

The whistling grew louder, loud enough to hurt her ears, as she plummeted.

“GIHEEE…!”

Taking the impact of landing on her shoulder, Phryne rolled to a stop in the front garden.

Despite falling from more than forty stories above the ground, her Level 5 Defense, far stronger than the average Dungeon monster’s, kept her alive. Blood gushing from her broken nose stained her hunting gear a deep red.

Phryne grabbed her face with her good hand, tears pouring down her cheeks.

“Uh—uHEE!”

The boarman warlord followed.

Jumping down the decorated exterior of the palace, he bounded a few times before his two feet shattered the stone path through the front garden upon impact.

Phryne was still planted on her rear end and desperately tried to shimmy backward—but the two were not alone.

From the front, from the side, from all directions…

Eight figures united. A catman, dark and white elves, and four prums appeared.

Looking at the faces of the adventurers surrounding her, all the color drained from Phryne's skin.

"Vana Freya, Level Six Hegni and Hedin, and even the Gulliver Brothers, Bringar…!"

All the fight left in her vanished in an instant with the knowledge that the most powerful members of *Freya Familia* were closing in on her from all sides.

After completing their mission to incapacitate enemy personnel, the group had reunited to take on *Ishtar Familia*'s most formidable member.

Ottar was directly in front of her, his ring of allies preventing her escape.

"HYEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! S-SPARE MEEEE!"

Supporting her head with one arm, she looked from one person to another and started begging for her life.

"What did *I* ever do to youuu? Surely nothing that would deserve thisss?"

"The fact that you're still breathing is sin enough," came a sharp retort from the catman, but Phryne never heard him.

"I-I'll do anything! Anything for the one who spares me! O-OH! THAT'S IT! My body, I'll pay with my body! I'll lay with you, so please LET ME GOOO!"

"UGH!" came a unified snap of disgust from the top-class adventurers.

"No woman could ever hope to rival me! NO ONE! Even goddesses can't handle my beauty! And you can ravage meeee, do whatever you will! You can't pass that uuuup!"

Each of the top-class adventurers was glaring at her with the eyes of death itself, but Phryne was too focused on talking herself up to notice.

The face of every Berbera around her was blank, completely devoid of emotion. Ottar cracked his neck before looking at the ground at the Amazon's feet.

Then—an ominous smile grew on Phryne's lips as she made her final bid.

"Even that Freya looks ugly next to me!"

With that…

The boar looked up.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Ottar lost it.

“GHEE!”

“You have soiled the name of a goddess most sacred!”

Red light shone like magic-stone lamps from behind his eyes as he roared with unimpeded fury.

Allen and the others donned similar looks of outrage, each seething with anger as veins throbbed and muscles twitched.

“There is only one fate worthy for the likes of you.”

“Death, death, death!”

Ottar’s voice grew as his allies chanted around him.

Phryne’s face turned a ghostly white. The ring of adventurers was closing in in unison, step by terrifying step.

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Ignoring every plea, eight dark shadows fell over the large Amazon.

"UW—UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!"

A chilling scream echoed through the smoky skies of the Pleasure Quarter.

◆

"…She's not coming after me?"

Bell regained his bearings during the fall and landed safely on the roof of a midsize brothel behind the palace. He looked up toward the top of the tallest tower, wondering why he didn't have company.

Bell stood with the broadsword ready, beads of light still flashing around his body. There was no movement coming from the highest point of the palace, so Bell slowly, cautiously lowered his weapon.

That was when Bell noticed that he was surrounded by a black shroud of smoke emerging from the Pleasure Quarter. His battle with a top-class adventurer had prevented him from seeing any of the flames or picking up on any of the magical energy residues hanging in the air like static electricity. It went without saying that this view was about the last thing he expected to see.

That could explain why Phryne dropped her pursuit—she'd gone to deal with this new threat.

*In that case…*Bell thought to himself as he jumped off the roof.

He could use this chaos and confusion to rescue Haruhime. Landing on the outside of the main tower, he set his sights on the stone bridge.

Taking advantage of every smidgen of the strength and speed boost of his temporary Level 4 Status, he jumped from awning to awning and used the stones that jutted out from the tower's exterior to ascend to the bridge that extended from the fortieth floor of the tower. While his ears registered the sounds of battle surrounding him, Bell focused all his energy into making it across the stone bridge as quickly as possible.

The Floating Garden was dead silent the moment he arrived.

All the injured Berbera, who had been lying motionless on the floor, were gone. An uneasy stillness had settled in under the night sky. Even the blue cloud of light emanating from the stones had become thin and wispy. Either too many of the lunatic light–infused stone slabs had been destroyed or too much of the moon's light was blocked by the cloud cover to maintain a constant glow.

Bell took a few steps into the scarred battlefield. Charred fragments of stone were scattered all over the place and large swaths of the floor were missing. The boy weaved his way through the debris until…

There she was, lying at the foot of the altar, alone.

"…So you're here."

A single Amazonian warrior stood up from behind the altar. Aisha's long hair swayed around her shoulders as she turned to face Bell.

Haruhime lay right next to her. Unconscious, she had been positioned comfortably against the stone altar.

It was almost as if Aisha had been waiting for Bell, knowing he would return. The boy didn't say anything, only continued to walk toward them. Lifting his heavily damaged broadsword into position, he came to a stop a few meders in front of Aisha and Haruhime.

The tip of Aisha's wooden blade had been thrust into the floor, sticking straight up. Aisha stood next to it, arms crossed in front of her chest as she listened to Bell's decree.

"I'm taking Haruhime with me."

There was no hesitation in his voice. Aisha narrowed her eyes and cocked an eyebrow.

"…Now that's more like it."

The face of a man with conviction—Bell finally had the look of a determined male, a hero.

Aisha couldn't have been happier.

"But, you know, I can't just say 'go ahead' and leave you to it."

She curled her lips into a dauntless smile and put her hands on her hips.

Aisha's long black hair and minimal dark-purple clothing shook from side to side as she dug her heel into the floor.

"Rules of the familia must be obeyed, it's in our blood…You know what I mean?"

"…"

The power of a god's Blessing, ichor, flowed in their veins. It also prevented them from easily escaping from the will of their god.

No matter how much pain the group caused them, no matter how many outsiders tried to assist them, the chances of successfully breaking free were almost nil. Aisha reminded Bell of that fact.

Bell knew, but there was nothing to say.

"Oh yeah, never got a chance to ask. Why did you go this far? Got a thing for her?"

A bit of humor was laced into her voice. Aisha grinned again and waited for Bell's next words.

The boy's gaze fell to the ground, but he'd opened his mouth to speak.

"…Being a prostitute was too painful for Miss Haruhime. So I decided to help her."

"…Don't know what gave you that idea, but she's a virgin who doesn't know her way around a man."

"Eh?"

Bell blinked a few times, wondering if he'd heard that right.

"She'd always pass out right before the main event. The sight of male skin made her lightheaded, the dimwit."

"…"

"Even just the other night, she keeled over onto the chest of a customer. Totally killed the mood and the guy didn't pay."

Bell had a feeling he knew exactly what she was talking about.

The night they first met, the same thing happened when she saw his muscles…

"B-but she said she'd given herself many times…to many different men."

"Maybe she was having some frisky dreams after passing out. Horny li'l fox."

Aisha was growing bored. Bell couldn't say anything more as he cast his gaze on the unconscious girl lying next to the altar.

"…Or perhaps she's been through so much that she can't tell the difference between a dream and reality anymore."

"!"

Kicked out of her own house and forcefully removed from her homeland.

Brought into a city where she didn't know anyone or anything and sold to the highest bidder. Haruhime's life had been a series of tragedies one after another.

Unwillingly becoming a prostitute, exposing her skin and being touched.

She had always been oppressed. Losing everything she knew in an instant and trapped in a cycle of darkness, Haruhime would have been consumed by despair.

Her life was a living nightmare.

With no escape, it was plausible she'd forgotten the difference between dream and memory.

All the more reason to save her from this.

To remove from the lineup the girl with eyes longing for the outside world.

"—She's worth a lot, even as a crappy prostitute."

Aisha's tone changed once again as Bell's determination grew by the second.

"Say she did leave this familia, others would eventually learn what she can do and try the same ritual. She's better off with us than some other dirtbags…Lady Ishtar's curse keeps telling me, don't let her go. So you know."

Aisha cracked the knuckles in her right hand as she spoke.

All the while, her eyes were asking one question: *Can you protect her?*

Plucking her sword out of the ground with her right hand, Aisha pointed the tip of the weapon directly at the still-sparkling Bell.

"Brace up. When a man rescues a woman, it's gotta be by force."

Bell could tell by Aisha's smile; he had no choice.

Just as his opponent wanted, Bell gripped his broadsword with both hands and took a defensive stance.

Bell and Aisha stared each other down, the distant sounds of roaring flames and screams wafting up from the Pleasure Quarter below.

"One minute."

Aisha said out of the blue.

"I didn't just look after Haruhime around here, she's been in my battle party. I know that magic like the back of my hand. Trust me, you've got only one minute."

She could tell just by looking at the flickering lights around the boy. *Uchide no Kozuchi* was about to wear off.

The lights were fading out one by one. She'd seen it and experienced it herself more times than she could count in the Dungeon. Haruhime might have poured all of her Mind into casting the Level Boost on Bell, but it wasn't going to last much longer.

Bell looked around at the lights that bathed his body in warmth.

"Attack right now, and you'd wipe the floor with me before saving yer girl."

Aisha jerked her chin toward Haruhime.

Bell kept his eyes trained on Aisha but only lifted the broadsword to protect himself. His feet stayed firmly planted in place.

Moments passed in silence.

"Such a moron…"

Aisha arrogantly narrowed her eyes, clearly put off by Bell's righteousness.

The light around Bell's body faded even further as the two of them locked eyes. The air around the two adventurers was so thick, even the breeze slowed to a crawl.

A loud crack came from the damaged stone pillar behind the altar. The last of the beads of light faded out of existence at the same moment that a piece of stone fell from the pillar and crashed to the floor.

The opening bell. The two warriors charged forward, weapons flashing in starlight.

"But—I don't got a problem with it!"

Wood and metal slammed together; Aisha's grin reflected off the broadsword.

Bell kept his eyes, burning with resolve, locked on his opponent.

More echoes pierced the night as the warrior prostitute and the white-haired boy exchanged blows at high speed.

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

Their bodies overlapped, weapons clashed. Aisha couldn't contain her excitement as she drove her own weapon forward and laughed at the top of her lungs.

The endless collisions and eruptions of sparks brought her a feeling of joy she hadn't felt in a long time.

"This! This is why I can't keep away from real men!"

Blades pressed against each other, Aisha leaned in and smiled from ear to ear in front of Bell.

"Arrogant, violent, strong…!"

Bell's body, Bell's glare, Bell's power—she took it all.

Joyous ecstasy made her entire body shake with anticipation.

"Only real men can get a woman's blood boiling!"

Aisha shouted as she raised her weapon high above her head and brought it down with tremendous force.

Bell stepped out of the way and paid no attention to the debris flying past his face as he stepped into his own counterattack.

She flipped away, and Bell kicked off the floor to pursue her. Picking up speed, the two traded even more blows as they raced around the Floating Garden.

Until finally, Aisha's elation reached that point at which her body couldn't stand the heat swelling within her.

"*—Come, reckless conqueror!*"

And she started casting.

Panicked footsteps rushed up the last set of stairs. Quick, hurried breaths echoed inside the thin stairwell.

Cool air caressed her sweat-covered body, distant flames illuminating her silhouette in the night.

A view of the red shell of the Pleasure Quarter opened up beneath her as she ran through the aftermath of an epic battle.

"How far are you going to run, Ishtar?"

"F-Freya…?!"

Ishtar's terror-filled eyes looked over her shoulder and saw the first strands of Freya's silver hair emerge from the eastern stairwell right behind her.

The moment the goddess's piercing silver eyes met hers, Ishtar's grudge against the goddess faded away and was replaced by fear.

Her territory in ruins, entire familia scattered, everything she'd worked so hard to create was being pulled out from under her by this extraordinary deity. Tripping over chunks of stone, getting back up, running, looking over her shoulder again and tripping, Ishtar repeated the cycle over and over in a desperate attempt to escape from Freya's wrath. The garden she knew had been torn to shreds by an ax and broadsword. She darted her way toward her private quarters, her last possible safe haven at the highest point of her palace's tallest tower.

"No…!!"

She discovered a fatal flaw in her plan.

The path that would lead her to safety wasn't beyond her trees and water features. That part of the garden had been completely destroyed. Only a stark cliff remained in its place. Ishtar had no way of knowing that it was Phryne who put it there.

She froze in place, looking down at the incredibly long drop below. *Ker-tap, ker-tap.* Freya had arrived.

"Thus ends our game of tag. Enough is enough."

"HYEEEEEE…!"

Turning to face her pursuer, Ishtar struggled to control the scream of fear escaping from her lungs.

There was another crater directly behind Freya in Ishtar's line of sight. Bell had created this one toward the end of his mad rush.

Ishtar and Freya stood face-to-face, no more than ten steps between them.

"I-it was just a little tease, Freya. I had no idea you cared so much for that boy…I-I won't do it again, I swear."

None of her followers remained inside the palace. Ottar's team had wiped them out.

Without any of her pawns to play, Ishtar resorted to asking for forgiveness.

A light breeze blew between them, making Freya's silver locks dance around her wicked smile.

"Ishtar? Your little pranks up until now have been laughable…but this went over the line. You will not be forgiven."

Freya's eyes showed no emotion, and yet her smile grew.

"I will *make that boy mine*."

Flares of anger flashed through her silver pupils, but she kept smiling.

"I will not forgive any woman who tries to take what is rightfully mine."

Freya's desire to have sole possession of Bell had been brought to bear. Ishtar was lost for words.

It was as if she were looking into a mirror. The same fires of jealousy and hatred that burned within Ishtar were now looking back at her in the form of Freya's obsession with Bell.

Eyes narrowing, Freya's lips started moving once again.

"This—is your final hour."

The knowledge of her fate made Ishtar's face turn white as a ghost.

"—Concurrent Casting?!"

Bell couldn't contain his surprise as his ears picked up the unmistakable melody of the trigger spell between the constant collisions of their blades.

"*Masculine warrior, strong soldier, greedy and unjust hero!*"

Every word was clear, pulsing with controlled magical energy as her lips moved in rhythm with her stride.

Slicing forward with her wooden sword, meeting Bell's broadsword head-on, all the while not missing a beat of her trigger spell, Aisha was pulling out all the stops.

Offense, movement, evasion, and defense—not a single attribute of her fighting style suffered. It was as if Antianeira were giving a street performance, dancing and singing for an audience. Mastering the complex and dangerous Concurrent Casting was proof that this Berbera was indeed stronger than Hyacinthus.

"*Prove your desire for the Empress's throne!*"

—*Not good.* Bell's mind raced.

Willing his arms to move faster, Bell upped the pressure on Aisha. While he did manage to slice off the very end of her ponytail, none of his strikes hit home. He couldn't even force her onto the defensive. Her long legs kept Bell from entering point-blank range as she led him back to the center of the Floating Garden. He pursued her to the best of his ability, but several hours of running for his life and intense combat were taking their toll.

"*Satisfy my body, penetrate and kill it to show your worth!*"

At this rate…?

Every syllable of her trigger spell made another bead of sweat roll down his face.

He was in danger of being caught up in her Magic. Becoming even more desperate, Bell raised the broadsword high and brought it down in a large arc, only to have it rejected by Aisha's heel. The Amazon kept spinning, jumped into the air, and nailed Bell in the face with the same foot.

"Gwah!"

Bell was knocked backward on impact.

"*My famished blade is Hipporyute!*"

Aisha completed her trigger spell as the space between the two fighters opened for a few vital seconds.

Bell regained his feet, eyes on his opponent. Having never seen the spell before, he had no idea what was coming his way. He shifted his weight to dodge the attack—when he realized where he was in the Floating Garden.

The very center, in front of the altar, right in front of the unconscious Haruhime.

If he avoided Aisha's spell, Haruhime would take a direct hit.

His eyes snapped back to Aisha, unsure if she would actually use the spell knowing that Haruhime was in the line of fire. Bell forgot to breathe once he saw the look in her eyes.

Show me you're can protect her.

Bell could feel it in her gaze.

If you're gonna take her, then prove you can.

Seeing the determination in Aisha's eyes—Bell knew what he had to do.

"!!"

"Argonaut."

He started the charge in the face of an attack he could not avoid.

White specks of light started to swirl around the broadsword in preparation to stop Aisha's full power.

"P-please, I beseech you!"

Freya took a step forward. Ishtar shifted backward as far as possible, heel against the cliff, and screamed with everything she had.

Eyes open wide, Ishtar caught a glimpse directly behind the other Goddess of Beauty of the scar in her garden created by Bell.

Suddenly, *smack!* A hand appeared from beneath and took hold of the outer layer of stone. Next, the head of the badly injured but handsome young man with tan skin popped above the surface.

It was Tammuz. Despite his still-bleeding wounds, no doubt inflicted by someone in Ottar's battle party, the faithful servant had returned to his mistress in her time of need.

There was hope! Ishtar hid the joy in her heart and desperately tried to buy him some time.

"Freya, I'll tell you something interesting!"

Tammuz was now halfway onto the roof.

"That child, Bell Cranell, is immune to our Charm! Don't you want to know why?"

Freya's thin shoulders jumped in surprise. Just behind her, Tammuz's second foot landed squarely on an intact slab of the garden’s stone floor.

“Should that be true, it makes him even more alluring. Now I want him even more.”

Freya’s eyes smiled, getting caught up in her own fantasy for a moment. Meanwhile, Tammuz held his breath as he quickly but silently snuck up behind the goddess.

“However, there is no need for me to hear it from you.”

Freya took another step forward. Tammuz chose that moment to strike.

I win! Ishtar screamed to herself, a malicious smile on her lips.

Just as Tammuz’s hands were a mere heartbeat from Freya’s neck—she calmly turned to face him like she knew he’d been there the entire time.

Ishtar’s poor follower was hit by the full force of Freya’s beauty. Taking it all in at once, Tammuz came to a sudden halt.

Ishtar watched in horror as Freya stepped toward her prized child, slid her fingers down his cheek, and smiled back at him.

“Ah…ahhh…!”

Tammuz collapsed to the floor.

Cheeks blushing and slack-jawed, the human looked up at the silver-haired goddess with glistening, quivering eyes.

The man who had received every bit of love Ishtar had to offer had been Charmed by Freya in the blink of an eye.

“Would you give us some privacy?”

Nodding over and over at Freya’s request, Tammuz climbed to his feet and drifted away from the two deities as if walking on a cloud.

Time stood still for Ishtar.

Her man had just been stolen. It happened right in front of her eyes.

He had sworn loyalty to her, been overwhelmed by her beauty, and still that woman had been able to nullify her love. Tammuz had been Charmed to the point he should have been her devout servant. There wasn’t enough humanity left within him to be Charmed by another.

Despite all that, Freya stole him.

Her Charm had been overwritten.

In other words, it was undeniable proof that Freya’s beauty exceeded her own.

Ishtar’s pride snapped, crumbling into nothingness.

"……hhy."

Whispered sounds weren't strong enough to become words.

Fingers clenched into fists; molars ground against each other.

Her tan skin, her luscious, curvy body, every feature of her face shook with anger and humiliation.

"WHY?!"

Ishtar howled at Freya, her skin flaring red.

Men who prized beauty above all else went to Freya, not her.

Just a moment ago, she had seen her own Charm erased. She could steal anyone from her.

They were both Goddesses of Beauty, so why was this possible?

Freya took another step closer, causing Ishtar to lash out once again.

"You and I—just what the hell is the difference?!"

"Essence."

A clear assertion.

"

trigger her Magic.

"Hell Kaios!"

An immense crimson shock wave emerged from the point where the tip of her weapon pierced stone.

Magical energy poured down her sword and followed the shock wave onto the battlefield. The energy spike grew larger, like the dorsal fin of a colossal shark emerging from the surface of the sea. Crimson wave engulfing the Floating Garden, the blade of energy careened at Bell.

Bell met it head-on. It had grown to twice his size by the time it came within range of the glowing broadsword. Bell stepped forward and put his entire body into one overarching swing.

A five-second charge.

The chimes of Argonaut filled the air as Magic collided with Skill.

"GEH—UUAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Crimson energy and white light detonated at the point of impact.

Flashes of crimson and white illuminated the Floating Garden under the moonlit sky.

—The charge wasn't enough.

Not enough power, not even close. Bell's feet were pushed backward by the crimson onslaught.

The heat of the magical energy singed his skin. *CRACK!* Several lines snaked their way through the blade of the broadsword.

Bell's eyes shot open as wide as they could go—but he refused to give any more ground. Thinking of Haruhime, he gritted his teeth and started to push back.

Mikoto had entrusted him with her mission. He had promises to keep, the resolve to see this through. And there was a girl's smile he wanted to see.

Power flowed back into his limbs. His spirit bellowed. His Status flamed to life.

Bell drove the broadsword through the crimson blade with all his body.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!"

BOOM! A blinding flash filled the night.

The two energies offset each other, dissipating into flickering specks of light as they faded into nothingness.

“Canceled it out…?!”

Aisha spat in anger as she watched her Magic disappear. However, the right corner of her lips was still curled in a smirk.

Hell Kaios dissipated along with Argonaut’s energy. Only the moonlight and the soft glow of lunatic light illuminated their standoff. At the same time, the explosion had triggered a burst of wind and a thin cloud of smoke—through which the white-haired boy charged with all the speed he could muster.

“

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Bell's momentum carried him even closer to Aisha.

Bell hadn't tried to defend. Instead, he focused all his remaining strength into *attacking*.

All the energy not sapped by Argonaut, all the energy left in every cell of his body, was poured into this strike.

Aisha watched helplessly as Bell's fist had a clear shot at her exposed stomach.

Ruby-red eyes shining with determination, the boy put everything he had into one punch.

"UWAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!"

The white rabbit's "vorpal fang."

"GuUUH!"

Aisha's body bent under the force of the blow to her gut.

Although her feet left the ground for a moment, her Defense was strong enough to withstand the hit. However—

Bell wasn't done.

"FIREBOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOLLLLLLLLLLLT!"

Point-blank range.

"GAHHHhh!"

A bolt of magical energy surged forth from the fist still buried in her abdominal muscles.

Aisha's body was launched skyward by several flaming lightning bolts.

Bell had committed his entire store of Mind to unleash every ounce of firepower his Magic could produce. The backlash in this explosion of energy through his weakened body erupted into the air as well. A quick flip, and he landed on his left hand and feet, sliding backward in a cloud of dust.

The boy's right hand was burned to a crisp, smoke still rising from his clenched fist.

The jagged electrical burn marks jutting out from Aisha's stomach were much more severe. Wide eyes hidden by her long bangs, a small smile grew on her lips as she fell through the air.

A smoking comet over the moon, the Amazon landed flat on her back and remained silent.

She had been defeated.

“UhhUUAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

The roar of a Goddess of Beauty echoed through the dark evening sky.

A sudden gust of wind ripped through her private garden as Ishtar launched herself at Freya, her face warped into a visage unbecoming of a deity. As for Freya…

…she calmly stepped out of the way with a small twirl.

“?!”

Long locks of silver hair and the silky white skin of her opponent’s shoulder blades flashed before Ishtar’s eyes. Her momentum carried her past her target like a boat riding a raging river past its dock.

The steep cliff behind Freya came rushing into view. The pupils of her eyes shrank to nothing but dots as Ishtar slammed her feet into the stone flooring in a desperate attempt to stop herself. A small cloud of dust rose into the air at her feet as she came to a halt with less than a celch to spare.

However…*ker-tap, ker-tap*.

“HYE—”

Thin high heels echoed behind her. Panicking, she spun around, only to feel a hand hit her square in the chest.

Freya stood there, ice in her eyes, and gave Ishtar a push.

Her heel was off the edge. There was nothing between her and the cliff. Nothing to save her.

Ishtar stretched up her body in a desperate attempt to avoid falling into a dark abyss that spread out beneath her at the base of her palace.

“Wai—”

Wait, Freya.

Those words were abruptly cut short.

SLAP.

Freya’s hand left a red imprint on Ishtar’s cheek.

“—a.”

A silent plea that fell on deaf ears. Body twisting, Ishtar lost her balance and fell off the edge.

Freya peered over the side and watched from the very top of the palace as the other deity became smaller and smaller.

She enjoyed every moment of the look on her former rival’s face before she fell out of sight. It brought a smile to her lips.

Until finally—*THUD!*

The cracking of divine bones shattered the silence.

Arcanum activated at the moment a fatal wound had been inflicted on an immortal body.

Ishtar's divine power sprang to life in the form of light more beautiful than anything ever before seen on Gekai—which violated the rules of their game.

Freya watched with glee and snapped her fingers the moment that Arcanum's light reached her eyes.

A heartbeat later, countless glowing orbs descended on the spot where Ishtar fell—*BOOOM!* A new, deeper explosion shook the Pleasure Quarter. A pillar of light took over the night sky.

A bridge of light that signaled a goddess's return to Tenkai.

Any deity who lost the game could never return.

A cruel smile appeared on Freya's lips as she watched her rival on Gekai meet a permanent end.

"Hopefully you've learned not to antagonize your superiors. Either way, it's too late now."

With one last grin, Freya turned her back on the pillar of light.

The score was settled.

◆

With Aisha defeated, Bell stumbled his way toward Haruhime, kneeled, and braced her upper body against his knees.

A sudden pillar of light rose to the heavens right in front of his eyes, the sonic boom pushing against his skin.

"What is that…?"

No way, he thought to himself as he looked upon the celestial light in awe.

A deity had been sent back to heaven.

The boy had never seen anything like this colossal beacon in his young life. He wasn't the only one to behold it for the first time, either. Other citizens of Orario looked out their windows with their own eyes to see the gigantic pillar dominating the landscape.

The songs of fairies that had been passed down through tales of heroes and mythical stories, or perhaps the roars of ferocious monsters that shook the land under his feet, were the only things that could rival the mythical light before him at this moment. All were seared into his memory.

Bell's breathing slowed as he watched the pillar part the clouds and continue on beyond the sky. It was as if this new light were illuminating the whole world at once. The shaking that accompanied the pillar suddenly stopped like the stillness after an earthquake. A sense of calm descended over Gekai.

Putting his arm around Haruhime to support her shoulders, Bell sat in silence for a few moments.

His mind wandered as he looked off into the distance. Gaze shifting, a certain divine being came into view.

"…A goddess?"

She was standing on the roof of the main tower.

The Floating Garden wasn't quite as high as the main tower, but Bell could clearly see the deity standing close to the edge.

Even at a distance, the goddess's perfect body was mesmerizing. There was a different aura to it, compared to Ishtar's beauty gone too far. Yes, a tranquil beauty that he could look at until the end of time, almost magical. Her silver hair flowed in the breeze, sparkling like the stars in the night sky.

The goddess turned to face Bell, who had lost all concept of time as he stared up at her. That's when the boy realized she was smiling at him.

And also, he felt a jolt!

A foreboding wave of cold sweat ran down his spine.

He knew this feeling. He'd felt it many times before. The feeling of being *seen*—a gaze that *didn't hold anything back*.

The boy was speechless as his eyes registered the deity's lips moving. While her voice didn't reach him, their meaning washed over him like rolling thunder.

"I love you."

Each one of the silent syllables echoed through his mind.

—It's her.

Bell was sure of it. Every time he'd felt the strange twang of an intense stare, she was the one behind it.

The nervous beating of his heart pounding in his ears, Bell stared in fascination at the being looking down from above…when she suddenly disappeared. As if awakening from a dream, Bell took control of his quivering lungs and came back into the moment.

"Nhh…"

At long last, the eyes of the girl in his embrace started to flutter.

Her green pupils emerged moments later and she looked up toward his face.

"Master Cranell…?"

Her green eyes met Bell's ruby-red gaze.

The girl was slowly but surely waking up. Bell watched her eyes clear for a moment before he gathered the girl's long golden hair and laid it over his right arm. Ignoring the surprised look on Haruhime's face, the boy put his right hand behind her head and pulled her close into his chest.

Haruhime's fox ears and tail twitched nervously, her cheeks blushing bright pink.

With Haruhime's body braced against his, both of Bell's hands were free. His fingers ran down her thin neck.

And slipped beneath the black collar still attached to her. *CRICK!* He grabbed both sides of the magic item and pulled. *SNAP!*

"Ah…"

Realizing what just happened, Haruhime cautiously brought her right hand up to her neck in disbelief.

The black curse of a leash that had restrained her for years had finally been lifted.

Her eyes jumped up to the boy's face. Just one look at his bloody, wound-riddled visage told her all she needed to know. Tears flooded her eyes, making them sparkle in the moonlight.

What are you supposed to say at times like this again…?

Supporting the sitting Haruhime with both his arms, Bell's mind went to work.

Thinking through all the heroes the girl liked, Bell desperately searched for the right words.

Then…in the end…

He found the simplest, right words to say:

"I've come to save you."

The first tear rolled down Haruhime's cheek, followed closely by a smile as radiant as a beautiful flower blooming in the early morning sun.

The distance was gone. Her real smile had finally surfaced. One look at her and Bell couldn't help but do the same.

"Thank you…my hero."

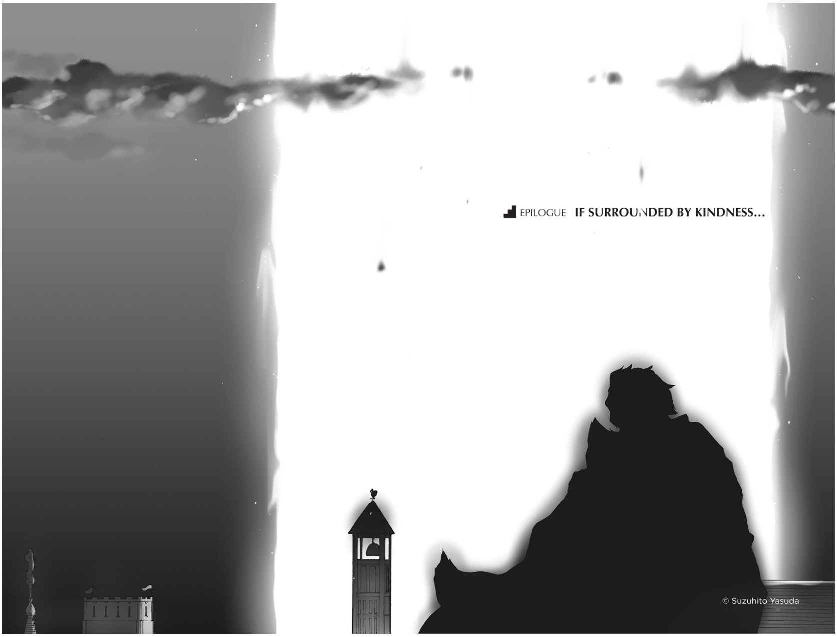
Those words made Bell's cheeks turn pink. A carefree, almost childlike smile grew on his lips.

Bell shared a moment of joy and happiness with the crying yet smiling renart.

“BELL!”

“Mr. Bell—!”

The two basked in each other’s warmth until the boy’s family came to meet them.



EPILOGUE IF SURROUNDED BY KINDNESS…

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EPILOGUE

IF SURROUNDED BY KINDNESS…

Two days had passed since *Freya Familia*’s attack on *Ishtar Familia*.

An uneasy fear still gripped the city in the aftermath. The utter destruction of *Ishtar Familia* and the Pleasure Quarter had numerous far-reaching effects for many residents of the Labyrinth City.

Adventurers, familias, merchants, the Guild, the gods and goddesses—too many to name.

““““Why’d you have to go and do that, Lady Freyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa…?!””””

The regular customers of the Pleasure Quarter, mortal and deity, were particularly distraught after *Ishtar Familia*’s downfall.

Seeing grown men and gods on their hands and knees, pounding the scorched earth with their fists amid the ruins of the brothels, would remain in the memories of many citizens for the rest of their lives. The gods harbored the first traces of resentment for the silver-haired Goddess of Beauty as their ashamed and irritated followers pulled them away.

The Pleasure Quarter bore an incredible amount of scars despite the lack of casualties. With its overlord gone, no matter how many merchants opened their own shops or the now-free prostitutes started their own brothels, it would take years for Orario’s third district to recover.

Freya Familia might have been the most powerful force in Orario, but even they could not escape being called to account by the Guild. Freya herself was summoned to the Pantheon and was forced to pay an incredibly large fine.

“I see.”

Was all she said. The matter was settled.

However, deities and mortals alike grew more fearful of *Freya Familia* after she sent Ishtar back to Tenkai, Freya’s loyal followers overwhelming what was considered to be an elite group literally overnight. This didn't seem to bother the Goddess of Beauty. She returned to her room on the highest floor of the tallest tower in the city. She was back on her throne atop Orario.

As for the former members of *Ishtar Familia*, they set off down different paths to find their own way in this new world.

"Haruhime, are you sure?"

The air was clear, not a cloud in the sky on this day when the sun was warm enough to bring a tear to anyone's eye.

Haruhime stood in front of Takemikazuchi and listened to the god speak.

"You can go back to the Far East, should you so choose. While returning to the manor might not be possible…there are goddesses like Tsukuyomi who would welcome you with open arms at our shrine."

The deity's eyes were filled with the same loving care he'd had for every child all those years ago. They were just as she remembered them. Haruhime could feel their warmth as Takemikazuchi stood with his arms folded across his chest. There, too, was also the same three-cornered hairstyle along with the unmistakable semblance of being dirt broke. Seeing him face-to-face again after all this time made Haruhime so happy, she wanted to laugh out loud.

"Thank you very much, Lord Takemikazuchi. However, I am fine."

Smiling like a flower in bloom, Haruhime put her hands to her chest. Takemikazuchi spent a moment and scratched behind his ear before returning her smile and nodding.

"Understood. In that case, we are once again neighbors of sorts. Visit anytime."

"I will," Haruhime said with a grin as Chigusa and Ouka led the rest of *Takemikazuchi Familia* out from behind their god and approached her.

"Um, Haruhime. There are so, so many things we need to catch up on. S-so…"

"Yes, Miss Chigusa. We shall have time before long."

"…I'm sorry, Haruhime. If we had known you were suffering, we would have—"

"Do not trouble yourself, Sir Ouka. I, Haruhime, am overjoyed to be able to meet all of you again."

A small tear appeared from behind Chigusa's bangs, her eyes hidden. Ouka, ever serious and to the point, shook his head.

She exchanged more happy words with the other three members of the familia and promised to visit them. With that, she bowed and took off at a slow run.

Turning around the corner and going through a gate, Haruhime arrived at the front lawn of a newly remodeled manor. Several people were talking among themselves on the lawn, including a young deity, her followers, and a dignified Amazon.

"Bell Cranell, don't go lettin' me down. You went that far to show me what you can do, what you're capable of, so just let me say this: I'll have your head if anything happens to the li'l' tyke."

"Y-yes, ma'am…!"

"Well, truth be told…With you here, I was considering joining this familia myself."

"A-anyone but you!!"

Aisha reached out as if to stroke Bell's chin but was interrupted by the young goddess's cry. Raising both arms, she physically shielded the white-haired boy from Aisha's touch.

"Bell will get eaten up!" she cried in despair.

"You're no fun," Aisha responded with a toothy grin. The group noticed Haruhime walking up to them shortly after.

"All done?"

"Ah, Miss Haruhime!"

Still grinning, Aisha turned to face Haruhime as Bell greeted her with a smile and wave. Haruhime smiled right back at them.

"Yes, I have finished talking everything over with *Takemikazuchi Familia*…Lady Aisha, words cannot express…"

"Stop it with the sentimental stuff, I'm no good at it. Besides, I did only what I wanted. No need to thank me."

Aisha cut short Haruhime's expression of gratitude with another grin and a wave of her hand.

The renart didn't know what to do at that point. A serious look overtook her face.

"I made sure the ol' commander and Berbera won't blab. We're the only ones who know, so yer *secret* shouldn't get out. If you do use it…stay low, keep out of sight."

"Lady Aisha…"

"U-um, that reminds me. In the end, what happened to

Phryne…?”

“Ah, found that toad beaten to a pulp in the front garden. Looked like she’d been through hell.”

Bell worked up the courage to ask about the top-class adventurer after hearing Aisha mention her. Aisha laughed to herself as she explained the extent of the damage Phryne had received at the hands of Freya’s warriors. Apparently, it was to the point that she could no longer show her face in public; she was currently shut up in the back room of some hotel, silently whimpering to herself.

“Well then, I’m off to find a new familia that’ll take me in. The way I am now, my Status sealed and all, no tellin’ who might try to take advantage.”

With Ishtar back in Tenkai, the effects of her Charm on Aisha had completely vanished. A clean, pure aura emanated from the Amazonian warrior as she turned to look at the blue sky overhead.

Haruhime didn’t understand the feelings swelling within her.

She had always been terrified of Ishtar, always been under her thumb. On the other hand, if the goddess hadn’t taken her in, there was no telling what might’ve become of her. Sure, the goddess had forced her into the life of a prisoner and prevented her escape, but she had also protected her.

Relief, sadness, loneliness—there was no simple way to explain the emotions swirling around in her heart. Haruhime cast her gaze to the sky as well.

“…Anyway, if something’s up, come find me. I don’t mind shellin’ out some advice if you need it.”

“…Thank you, Lady Aisha! Thank you for everything!”

Aisha didn’t respond to Haruhime as she walked toward the front gate. One last wave of her hand and she disappeared from sight.

Haruhime stared at the gate for a moment before slowly turning to face Bell and the others.

“Henceforth…I, Sanjyouno Haruhime, would like to officially ask to join *Hestia Familia* as a fellow member…”

“Ehh, no need for the fancy words. Haven’t been here all that long myself. Nice to meet you. The name’s Welf Crozzo, but don’t bother yourself with my family name.”

“Lilly’s glad to meet you, too, Miss Haruhime. My name is Lilliluka Erde.”

The human with red hair and the prum with chestnut-colored locks stepped forward and introduced themselves.

"The pleasure's mine!" responded Haruhime enthusiastically, thrilled to be exchanging names with people she had never met before.

"Ahem…That makes me the last one. A lot happened yesterday so I'm sure you already know, but I'm Hestia. Welcome to the family, officially."

Hestia, standing even shorter than Haruhime, puffed out her bulging chest and echoed Haruhime's words in her own greeting.

Haruhime gave a deep bow and was surprised to discover upon raising her head that Hestia had walked all the way up to her.

"But listen here, Haru-hi-me. It appears that you have some rather risky emotions when it comes to Bell…I brought him up myself, and I won't allow any hotheaded shenanigans!"

"Wha…umm, huh…?"

"Please don't say such ridiculous things! Just who exactly *brought up* Mr. Bell? Isn't Lady Hestia just a goddess with a massive debt and living off Mr. Bell's hard work?"

"H-hey! A goddess's dark secrets are not something to be talked about in front of new recruits!"

"Yeah, you can ignore all that."

Hestia and Lilly's argument picked up speed, the two glaring at each other as Welf laughed drily and shrugged at Haruhime. Bell watched the two of them argue with a bead of cold sweat running down his neck.

Oh yes, this could be fun.

Haruhime thought to herself as she watched the interactions of her new allies with a laugh threatening to burst from her cheeks.

—Creak. The front door of the manor opened without warning.

"M-Miss Mikoto!"

"Hey, now, you sure you're okay to be on your feet?"

"I-it's not a problem. Only the symptoms of Mind Down remain…I-I also want to celebrate Lady Haruhime's inauguration…!"

Bell and Welf worriedly took a few steps toward their stumbling friend.

She had received considerable treatment from someone after the battle at the palace. When they found her outside the main tower, there was an empty elixir bottle next to her. Physically she looked fine, but she was having a difficult time with drowsiness—in fact, she slept through the entire day after the battle. She was up and moving around by sheer willpower.

Haruhime looked on with concern as the girl attempted to go down the stairs to the front lawn. “Uwahh!” Tripping over her own foot, Mikoto tumbled down the last few steps before falling into the renart’s arms.

“M-my apologies, Lady Haruhime.”

“N-no need for apologies…”

Bell and the others watched as their unexpected reunion became a hug.

A few moments passed before two girls broke apart enough to look into each other’s eyes. Haruhime broke the silence.

“It is I who should apologize to you, Miss Mikoto…I have caused you so much trouble, so much pain…”

“L-Lady Haruhime…”

Pulling away from her childhood friend, Mikoto became flustered at Haruhime’s apology and fidgeted restlessly.

Haruhime kept her eyes closed for a little while.

Then, summoning all her courage and tensing up her tail, Haruhime looked at Mikoto with determination in her eyes.

“Thank you for saving me…Mikoto.”

Eyes moist and glistening, Haruhime expressed her gratitude in a soft voice.

Mikoto’s lips quivered at the sight. Overcome with emotion, she had only one request.

“Lady Haruhime, please smile.”

“Eh…?”

“I…Just like long ago, when we were young. I want to see you smile from the bottom of your heart.”

Haruhime’s surprise lasted for only a moment.

Meeting Mikoto’s dark-purple eyes, which were on the verge of bursting, with her own tearful green eyes, Haruhime beamed a great smile at her old friend. Teardrops now freely falling from her face, Mikoto let her happiness broaden across her entire face and smiled back.

It was just the same as back in their hometown, the two sharing grins like little girls. It was the first time in far too long, but it was exactly how they remembered.

“…Master Bell, you truly have my gratitude.”

The two turned to face the white-haired human and Haruhime offered her thanks.

The boy's shoulders shrank inwardly; he was almost embarrassed. He scratched his blushing cheek for a moment before returning his usual carefree grin.

"Starting today, we're family. Welcome home."

Haruhime closed her eyes and cried once more.

Carved in her back, Hestia's Blessing flooded her body with comforting warmth, making Haruhime feel as if she was being plunged into a world of kindness. She felt a flood of emotions rising to the surface and tried to hold it all together.

"I am delighted to call you my family, Master Bell…May our relationship be everlasting."

Haruhime's head lowered toward him in a deep bow. Her face was like cherry blossoms in bloom when she finally stood up.

"Hold on there, Haruhime. Don't you think your choice of words was a little weird?"

"I agree! Something is definitely strange."

"W-was it so?"

"T-take it easy on her, Lady Hestia, Lady Lilly."

"We have other things to talk about…like how we're gonna celebrate our new recruit!"

"Oh! I like your thinking, Welf! All right, then, it's time for a welcome party!"

"Stop. It. Right. There! Our familia doesn't have the funds to do that right now…!"

"Don't be such a stick in the mud! Bell, you think we should have a party, right?"

"We probably should, Goddess. It's for Miss Haruhime, after all."

"Mr. Bell—!"

"I-is this truly acceptable?"

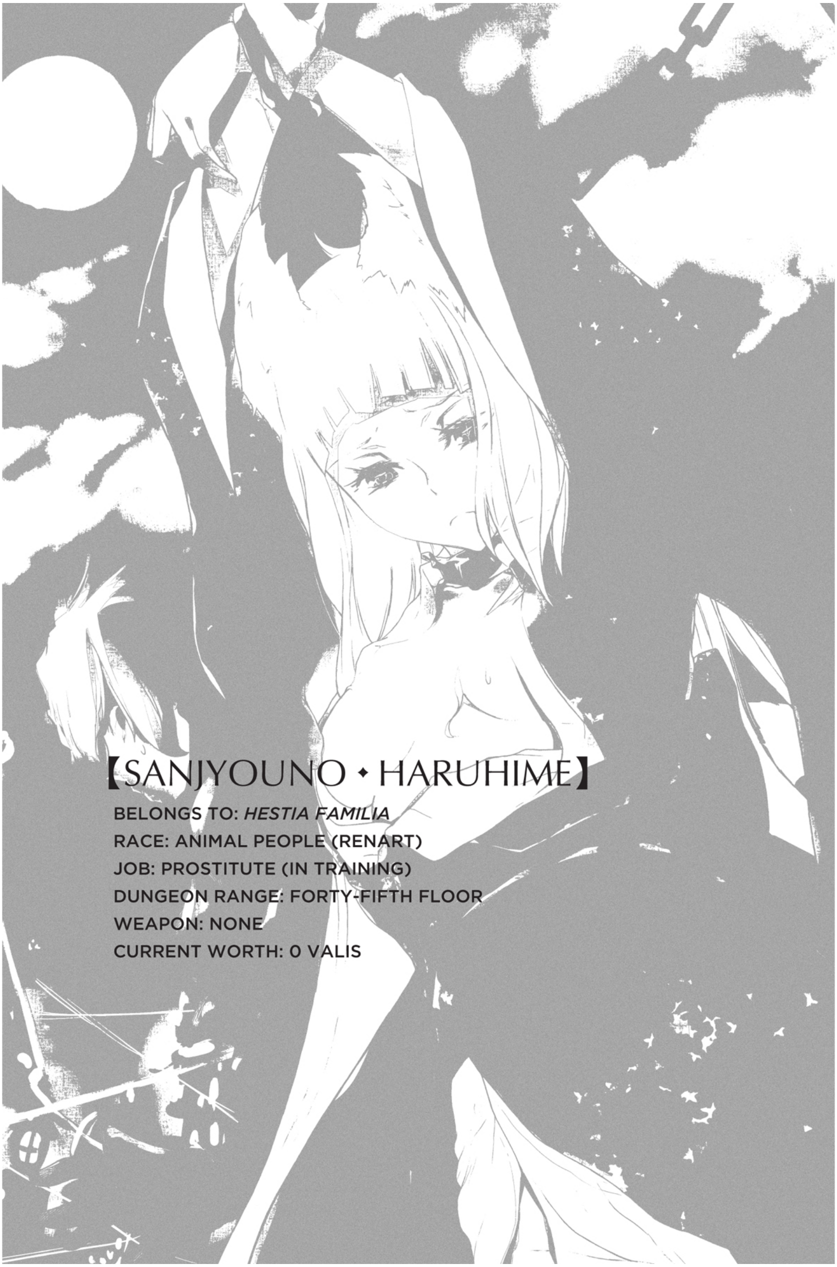
"Of course it is, Lady Haruhime! We will have to invite Lord Takemikazuchi and our other friends from home as well!"

Swirling happy voices surrounded a girl dressed in a red kimono.

The renart who had always kept her distance had at last opened up her heart to the point where she could laugh along with everyone else.

The clear, azure sky seemed to watch over the young goddess and her followers.

And the emblem above the front door seemed to sparkle in the sunlight as if it were celebrating the addition to the family in its own way.



【SANJYOUNO ✦ HARUHIME】

BELONGS TO: *HESTIA FAMILIA*
RACE: ANIMAL PEOPLE (RENART)
JOB: PROSTITUTE (IN TRAINING)
DUNGEON RANGE: FORTY-FIFTH FLOOR
WEAPON: NONE
CURRENT WORTH: 0 VALIS

STATUS

Lv. **1**

STRENGTH: I 8 **DEFENSE: I 32** **DEXTERITY: I 15**
AGILITY: I 23 **MAGIC: E 403**

《MAGIC》

【UCHIDE NO KOZUCHI】

- LEVEL BOOST
- CAN BE CAST ON ONLY ONE TARGET AT A TIME
- AN INTERVAL IS REQUIRED BETWEEN CASTINGS
- THE PRACTITIONER CANNOT CAST ON ONESELF

《 SKILL 》

【NONE】

《ATTIRE》

- RED KIMONO
- HAS NO DEFENSIVE PROPERTIES. GIVEN TO HARUHIME BY HER SUPERIORS FOR PROSTITUTE WORK.
- ACTUALLY IMPORTED FROM THE FAR EAST BY AISHA. 180,000 VALIS.

Afterword

"This story feels like it belongs onstage."

That's what my editor said when I first presented the plot outline for book seven.

At first, I had no clue what he was talking about. However, once I set to writing and fleshed out the story, I started to understand what he meant. The setting of this book is still the Labyrinth City Orario, but there's so much of the city yet to be explored that I decided to think of it as an entirely new location by adding more detail than ever before. The city probably has a different feel to it from previous volumes.

The words *prostitute*, *brothel*, and *the Pleasure Quarter* come up quite often in this story. The idea to move the cast of characters out of the Dungeon for a change began when I started wondering if a city inundated with adventurers wouldn't have this kind of profession. The more I thought about it, the more I realized this subject had to be addressed. My hands were physically shaking as I wrote down the first ideas for this book.

I believe that prostitutes and brothels belong to a different type of fantasy world. While I didn't go into great detail in the story itself, I also believe that there are prostitutes who sell one night of dreams come true in order to live to see tomorrow, to save money for the future, or to support their partner of choice at the expense of their own pain and anguish. Thinking back, the period plays and dramas I watched in my youth greatly influenced my way of thinking. Seeing these women, kneeling on a floor cushion, connecting with their customers in hopes of a better future made me sympathize with them and feel upset when they faced rejection. I was inspired by these plays dealing with red-light districts of all types.

Back to the book itself, I did my best to work in more "service scenes" for this volume, resulting in three times more than previous books. In writing them, I discovered that there's a great deal of depth to romantic comedy. Most of this story was based on living through great hardship, but yes, I apologize for being unable to maintain a serious tone throughout the book.

Before I express my gratitude, as I always do, I have an announcement to make.

This story has been made into an anime that will air in the spring of 2015.

I jumped out of my chair in excitement, pumping my fists in the air, when I first heard the news. That excitement is still with me, but I'm also quite nervous. This is all thanks to the fans who have continued to support *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick up Girls in a Dungeon?* To everyone who has been on this journey with me from the beginning and everyone who just recently picked up the series, I cannot thank you enough. I would love to put my happiness into words for all of you right now, but I will pour all that appreciation into the next book as my way of giving back. I will continue to work hard on the light novels while the anime is on the air.

With that out of the way, it's time to give thanks where thanks are due.

First, I must thank my supervisor, Mr. Kotaki, and Mr. Suzuhito Yasuda for even more beautiful illustrations for this book. Next, to my editor, Mr. Kitamura, who encouraged me when I came to him saying, "There aren't enough pages to hold all I want to write," by telling me to "Get it all on paper and we'll work it out." Next, a big thank-you to all staff members involved in this project.

Also, I would like to thank the voice actors, writers, and staff who created the drama CD that was included with the release of this book.

Lastly, I would like to thank you, the reader.

I feel that books five, six, and seven were written in very quick succession (so quick that I've lost quite a bit of weight), so I plan on taking a bit more time on book eight. Please look forward to the next installment.

Thank you for reading all the way to the end.

Until next time!

Fujino Omori

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